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Allegiances

Thunderclan

Leader: Firestar (M) -bright flame colored tom with lighter chest and vibrant green eyes

Deputy: Brackenfur (M)-golden brown tabby tom with green eyes

Medicine Cat: Leafpool (F)-light brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Warriors:

Dustpelt (M)-dark brown tabby tom with dark amber eyes

Apprentice: Hazelpaw

Sandstorm (F)-pale ginger she-cat with green eyes

Cloudtail (M)-long-haired white tom with bright blue eyes

Apprentice: Poppypaw

Thornclaw (M)-light brown tabby tom with darker chest and green eyes

Brightheart (F)-white she-cat with ginger patches and a dark blue eye

Brambleclaw (M)-dark brown tabby tom with orange eyes

Apprentice: Berrypaw

Ashfur (M)-light gray tom with scattered darker spots and ice blue eyes

Sorreltail (F)-ginger and black splashes with white belly, chest, paws, tail tip, and muzzle and yellow eyes

Spiderleg (M)-long-limbed black tom with brown underbelly and amber eyes

Apprentice: Mousepaw

Brook Where Small Fish Swim (F)-brown tabby she-cat with purple-gray eyes

Stormfur (M)-dark gray tom with yellow eyes

Whitewing (F)-white she-cat with green eyes

Birchfall (M)-light brown tom with darker back and lighter chest and paws and amber eyes

Apprentice: Cinderpaw

Apprentices:

Berrypaw (M) (Mentor: Brambleclaw)- cream tom with dark amber eyes and short tail

Hazelpaw (F) (Mentor: Dustpelt)- small gray and white she-cat with yellow-green eyes

Mousepaw (M) (Mentor: Spiderleg)- gray tom with white chest and face and blue-green eyes

Cinderpaw (F) (Mentor: Birchfall)- gray tabby she-cat with deep blue eyes

Honeypaw (f) (Mentor: Squirrelflight)- golden she-cat with bright green eyes

Poppypaw (f) (Mentor: Cloudtail)- white she-cat with orange and black splashes and light blue eyes

Queens and Kits:

Ferncloud (F)- pale gray she-cat with darker flecks and light spring green eyes

(Mate: Dustpelt)

Mother to:

Icekit (F)- snowy white she-cat with bright blue eyes

Foxkit (M)- dark red tabby tom with lighter muzzle and paws and green eyes

Daisy (F)- long-furred cream she-cat with lighter chest and light blue eyes

(Mate: Spiderleg)

Squirrelflight (F)- bright auburn she-cat with white front paw and green eyes

(Mate: Brambleclaw)

Apprentice: Honeypaw

Mother to:

Lionkit (M)- light golden tabby tom with dark amber eyes

Hollykit (F)- jet black she-cat with striking green eyes

Jaykit (M)- light gray tabby tom with blue eyes

Elders:

Longtail (M)- pale brown tabby tom with black stripes, scars across green eyes

Mousefur (F)- small dusky brown she-cat with orange eyes

Shadowclan

Leader: Blackstar (M)- large white tom with huge jet black paws and piercing yellow eyes

Deputy: Russetfur (F)- dark ginger she-cat with light green eyes

Medicine Cat: Littlecloud (M)-small white tom with warm gray back, tail, and head and blue eyes

Warriors:

Oakfur (M)-light brown tom with dull green eyes

Rowanclaw (M)-dark ginger tabby tom with amber eyes

Apprentice: Ivypaw

Smokefoot (M)-long-black tom with dark green eyes

Apprentice: Owlpaw

Toadfoot (M)- dark brown tom with pale green eyes

Crowfrost (M)-black and white tom with gray eyes

Kinkfur (F)-long-furred golden tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Ratscar (M)-brown tom with long scar along back and dark green eyes

Whitetail (F)-long-furred white she-cat with gray eyes, one blind eye

Snowbird (F)-pure white she-cat with light green eyes

Snaketail (M)-dark brown tom with tabby tail and bright yellow eyes

Apprentice: Scorchpaw

Applefur (F)-mottled brown she-cat with orange eyes

Apprentices:

Oakpaw (M)-light brown tom with dull green eyes

Ivypaw (F) (Mentor: Rowanclaw)- long-furred white she-cat with orange, brown, and black along her back and tail and dark blue eyes

Owlpaw (M) (Mentor: Smokefoot)- light brown tabby tom with yellow-green eyes

Scorchpaw (M) (Mentor: Snaketail)- dark gray tom with ragged ears and orange eyes

Queens and Kits:

Tawnypelt (F)- bright orange and black she-cat with white muzzle and chest and green eyes (Mate: Rowanclaw)

Expecting Kits

Elders:

Cedarheart (M)- dark gray tom with brown eyes

Tallpoppy (F)- long-legged light brown she-cat with pale light green eyes

Windclan

Leader: Onestar (M) -light brown tabby tom with white chest and yellow eyes

Deputy: Ashfoot (F)-medium gray she-cat with blue eyes

Medicine Cats:

Barkface (M)-short-tailed brown tom with amber eyes

Apprentice: Kestrelpaw

Kestrelpaw (M)- mottled gray tom with white splotches and green eyes

Warriors:

Tornear (M)-wiry gray tabby tom with blue eyes

Apprentice: Harepaw

Crowfeather (M)-dark gray tom with blue eyes

Apprentice: Heatherpaw

Owlwhisker (M)-light-brown tabby tom with yellow eyes

Whitetail (F)-small white she-cat with green eyes

Apprentice: Breezepaw

Nightcloud (F)-black she-cat with amber eyes

Weaselfur (M)-lithe ginger tom with white paws and green eyes

Leaftail (M)-dark tabby tom with amber eyes

Dewspots (F)-spotted gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Willowclaw (F)-gray she-cat with green eyes

Emberfoot (M)-gray tom with two dark paws and blue eyes

Apprentices:

Harepaw (M) (Mentor: Tornear)- brown and white tom with pale green eyes

Antpaw (M)-brown tom with one black ear and yellow eyes

Heatherpaw (F) (Mentor: Crowfeather)- light brown tabby she-cat with purple eyes

Breezepaw (M) (Mentor: Whitetail)- lean black tom with yellow eyes

Queens And Kits:

Gorsetail (F)- very pale gray and white she-cat with blue eyes

Mother To:

Swallowkit (F)- dark gray she-cat with dull green eyes

Sedgekit (F)- light brown tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Thistlekit (F)- long-haired white she-cat with purple eyes

Elders:

Morningflower (F)- mottled brown she-cat in different shades with white chest and paws and amber eyes

Webfoot (M)- wiry dark gray tabby tom with orange eyes

Riverclan

Leader: Leopardstar (F) -spotted golden she-cat with amber eyes

Deputy: Mistyfoot (F)-pale blue-gray she-cat with blue eyes

Apprentice: Dapplepaw

Medicine Cats:

Mothwing (F)-dappled golden she-cat with pale yellow eyes

Apprentice: Willowpaw

Willowpaw (F)-light gray tabby she-cat with bright green eyes

Warriors:

Blackclaw (M)-smoky black tom with yellow eyes

Voletooth (M)-small brown tabby tom with orange eyes

Apprentice: Minnowpaw

Reedwhisker (M)-black tom with dark gray eyes

Apprentice: Pouncepaw

Mosspelt (F)-brown and black tortoiseshell she-cat with white chest and paws and blue eyes

Apprentice: Pebblepaw

Beechfur (M)-light brown tom with green eyes

Rippletail (M)-dark gray tabby tom with pale gray eyes

Mintfur (M)-light gray tabby tom with green eyes

Otterheart (F)-dark brown she-cat with amber eyes

Pinefur (F)-very short-haired tabby she-cat with dark green eyes

Rainstorm (M)-mottled gray-blue tom with blue eyes

Duskfur (F)-brown tabby she-cat with amber eyes

Apprentices:

Dapplepaw (F) (Mentor: Mistyfoot)- mottled gray she-cat with amber eyes

Pouncepaw (M) (Mentor: Reedwhisker)- ginger and white tom with short tabby tail and blue eyes

Minnowpaw (F) (Mentor: Voletooth)- dappled dark gray and white she-cat with yellow eyes

Pebblepaw (F) (Mentor: Mosspelt)- mottled gray tom with green eyes

Queens and Kits:

Dawnflower (F)- very pale gray she-cat with blue eyes

Elders:

Heavystep (M)- thickset brown tabby tom with green eyes

Swallowtail (F)- plump dark brown tabby she-cat with green eyes

Stonestream (M)- gray tom with blue eyes

Outsiders

Graystripe (M)- dark gray tom with darker stripe along his back and yellow eyes

Millie (F)- gray tabby she-cat with blue eyes

Prologue

The sky above was littered with stars but clouds were creeping at its edges, growing closer to the center with each moment that passed. A clearing laid in the center of the area. It was lined with great, old oak trees with trunks that stood strong for longer than any cat at the lake had lived and branches that folded in above the clearing, intertwining with the other trees to form a canopy that just barely let in the light. Directly beneath that opening was a pool of water. It was so small it looked as though it could have been made by a day's rain that simply hadn't faded away yet, but it had remained there with that size for as long as the trees, if not longer.

On this night, as the clouds continued to close around the clearing, there stood three ancient cats. One was a large ginger tom with white paws that seems to hold the gravity of the world. The second was a black she-cat with green eyes that stood out against the shadows forming behind her and made it seem as if all but her eyes hadn't yet arrived. The third was a wiry sandy brown she-cat with an expression in her amber eyes that seemed to simultaneously welcome you in and drive you away. "He's late." She meowed gruffly.

"Calm down Windstar." The ginger tom responded. "You know he wouldn't miss a night this important."

As they stood together, the black she-cat began tapping a front paw, irritation pricking up her neck fur the longer they waited. Finally, as the clouds were nearly above their pool, a fluffy silver tom entered the clearing, padding along one paw at a time with the confidence of someone who had all the time in the world, and no urgency to get here or do anything else. He took his time to walk over between the brown she-cat and the ginger tom before he sat in front of the pool, settling gracefully into a patch of grass.

"What took you so long Riverstar?" The black she-cat had clearly been holding these words back as Riverstar savored the walk.

"On a night like this, you really can't rush me Shadowstar. The temperature was just perfect for a swim. Besides, I'm here in time." Riverstar stretched out, shaking the last few drops of water from his tail.

"You could swim anytime you like. Whatever we see tonight may change the course of the clans forever. Why else would we four be called?" The ginger tom asked. There was less anger in his voice than in Shadowstar's, but it still had a firmness that wouldn't be argued with.

Riverstar's calm eyes settled on the giant ginger tom. "Did you notice?"

"Notice what?"

"How easily it comes to you now: We four."

Thunderstar looked ruffled by Riverstar's words, and he broke his gaze from the other tom. "That is who we are now." He murmured.

"I knew him too." Shadowstar cut in. "Maybe it's better that history forgot him."

"The clans didn't just forget him!" Thunderstar's eyes shot over to the black she-cat, blazing with an anger not quite directed at her. "Even we may never see him again."

The other three looked taken aback for a moment, but his emotions didn't phase them for long. Finally, Riverstar spoke again. "Maybe one day, but until then there is work to be done."

Windstar looked around the group with a firm expression that seemed to push away the unpleasant thought. "Riverstar is right. We were called here for something very important, which is why we need to stop chattering like blackbirds so we don't miss it." Thunderstar nodded in appreciation to the brown she-cat for taking their attention back to the matter, but didn't say another word.

At that moment, the clouds converged, leaving only a small hole for the light of the moon to shine through, directed at the pool. As the light hit the surface of the water, the reflections of the four cats

beside it melted away and were replaced with the image of a sleek, pure ginger tom standing by a shaggy dark gray tom with pale blue eyes. The dark gray tom stood, the faintest evidence of stars glinting in his fur, and faced the ginger tom.

"There will be three, kin of your kin, who will hold the power of the stars in their paws." As he spoke, his words sounded strong but ancient, older even than his aged appearance would suggest. The ginger tom was confused, glancing around the area as if physically searching for answers the world could provide.

The picture faded away from the pool, and the reflections returned once more. The cats around it looked up from the water, each of their eyes meeting the others' as they all tried to process what they had seen.

"It's a prophecy." Riverstar broke the silence.

"Well, obviously. But it's not new. It's been delivered already, and I can't say I know that tom who delivered it." The brown she-cat replied, her eyes flitting around to the others.

Thunderstar bowed his head slightly to the she-cat. "Even so, Windstar, it's pretty clear why we received this vision tonight, isn't it? This prophecy was given to him long ago, but now, it is about to come true. Firestar's daughter will soon have kits. The prophecy will come true."

Riverstar tilted his head, his expression calm as it always was, but with a tint of contemplation. "That does seem to be the point of this, yes. But if we're being notified of these cats' power, mustn't it be cause for something else? Will they be stopping something enormous, or will we need to stop them?"

Riverstar spoke the words they had all been thinking, but were hesitant to speak aloud. If it was sent to the oldest clan cats there were, all of Starclan had to know about it, but they didn't know what they were preparing for. A silent chorus of exhaling and shuffles circled the group, as if no cat was prepared to make a judgement call.

After a moment, Windstar stood. "At the very least, when the three are born all of Starclan should be watching over them. If we can understand as early as possible what their power will be used for, we can begin to prepare."

"Which means we need to spread the word. Every Starclan cat we know must be told." Shadowstar continued.

Thunderstar nodded, although his mind was somewhere else. They did need to spread the word to Starclan, of course, but there might be someone else they need to tell. "Usually prophecies go to living cats as well as the dead. Firestar has the prophecy already, should we tell one of the three?"

Windstar quickly shook her head, seeming appalled that he would even consider the idea. "Have you not listened to us, Thunderstar? We have no idea what the kits will be like, or what they will use their power for. We don't even know how their power will manifest. We can't tell them anything until we know who's side they're on."

Thunderstar sighed, knowing Windstar was missing the point. "But wouldn't they be more likely to fall on the side of right if we guided them, if they knew about their power and could learn to control it?"

"Not necessarily." Riverstar interjected. "If you tell kits they have the power of Starclan, they won't listen to you. They won't listen to anyone. They'll think themselves to be above everything, which is an easy way to push them against us. No, we can't tell them, at least until they're older. For now, the three are on their own."

Run.

The word coursed through her mind, keeping her going, keeping her from losing her mind. She had spent too much time thinking, too much time rewriting. She knew it was killing her, pawstep by pawstep. This place wouldn't allow her peace. The trees stretched high into the sky, with needles tied together so thickly not a speck of light could come through.

Run. Find it.

She didn't know what she believed she could find. Even as the seasons below changed, these trees never did, so as to deny her any relief. Once, she had tried climbing. In her moons, seasons, lifetimes away, she had grown rusty. It took her moons more to learn again, with no cat to help her, but she did eventually reach the top of one of the trees. The sky there was black. There was no day, dawn, or even stars or moonlight to shine through. All of that had been abandoned when she came here, or was put here? It became hard to remember after a while. All she knew for sure was that she belonged.

As she did through every moment of this life she had left, the tan and white patched she-cat kept walking. Her amber eyes would try to survey the clearings and bushes ahead, but there was no way to map it. The forest warped around her, keeping her from ever seeing another soul.

Well, except for those she brought.

She was the one who named this place, who let word of it percolate through the clans who still lived below. To the first cat she brought to share her hell with her, she had told them about it. This is the place cats go when Starclan cannot or will not take you. The place where nothing will ever change, and everything changes all the time. The place where no hope will live for you ever again. This is the Place of No Stars.

Chapter 1

"You three have reached the age of six moons, and it is time for you to be apprenticed. From this moment onward, until you earn your warrior names, you will be known as Cinderpaw, Poppypaw, and Honeypaw." Firestar's voice rang outside in the clearing, and the calls repeating their names started erupting soon after. Lionkit squeezed through his siblings, trying to get a look at the ceremony from the small entrance of the nursery they were confined to.

"Birchfall, Cinderpaw will be your first apprentice, but I trust you learned enough from Ashfur to pass on your knowledge and give us a great warrior. Poppypaw, your mentor will be Cloudtail. He has served his clan well for many moons and was a good mentor to Rainwhisker. I'm sure he will do just as well for you. And Squirrelflight, you will train Honeypaw. This will be your first apprentice as well, but you have shown your relentless energy and dedication as an apprentice and warrior which I know will make you a fine mentor to Honeypaw."

"Oof!" Suddenly he was flattened to the ground as his sister, Hollykit, landed on top of him in an attempt to see as the apprentices welcomed their mentors. Lionkit pushed her off, scampering closer to the entrance again. She rolled off him and pushed her hind paws into his flank.

Oh you're on! Lionkit thought to himself, sensing the playful tension. Smiling slightly, he lashed out a paw in her direction, though he found it only grasped air and his off-balance posture nearly made him topple to the ground face-first.

"Slow slug!" she teased, rolling her eyes.

"I don't see what you two are fighting over. We can hear it just fine from here." Jaykit grumbled from his nest.

Lionkit ignored him. "I'll get you this time!" he called. He leaped toward Hollykit this time, knocking her out of the way in an

attempt to get a better view. Although he realized with alarm that he had overshot. Rather than landing on his sister, he fell clumsily on top of Ferncloud's two tiny kits. Ferncloud gave him a shove, pushing him away with her hind paws.

Lionkit gasped. "Have I hurt them?" He asked, the competition clearly done.

"No, thank Starclan," Ferncloud meowed, a snap to her voice. "You're still too small to do much damage. But you should be more careful playing in here!" Foxkit and Icekit mewled as she tucked them closer into her belly. "You three are getting too rough for the nursery."

"Sorry, Ferncloud," Hollykit mewed.

"Sorry," Jaykit echoed, apologetic even though Ferncloud's comment probably wasn't directed at him. At least the queen's anger would not last. She would easily forgive kits she had suckled —when Squirrelflight's milk had not come, it was Ferncloud who had fed Lionkit, Hollykit, and Jaykit. In just the last moon though, Ferncloud had two kits of her own in Icekit and Foxkit. It was strange, sharing their mother-like figure with another two mewing balls of fur that couldn't even play yet.

"Besides, it'll be our turn soon enough, and then we'll be able to see it easily." Hollykit meowed. Her tone was haughty, as if she somehow didn't want just as badly as him to see the ceremony. Cinderkit Poppykit and Honeykit has been so fun to play with when they were all in the nursery, but that wouldn't be happening anymore. At least not until we're apprentices too!

"There's really nothing to fuss about." Jaykit cut in. "It'll just mean more cats watching over our every move."

"Don't pretend you won't be excited to become an apprentice Jaykit. It'll be so great, being able to get out of camp, train to be a warrior, and help the clan instead of being treated like we're useless!" Hollykit's eyes shone as she spoke, her gaze locked on something no one else could see.

"Maybe, but right now we can't do anything. Even Squirrelflight will be out more than usual now that she has an apprentice to train." Jaykit responded. Honestly, it wouldn't be too much of a change from the norm. Their mother always loved them; there was no doubt in Lionkit's mind about that. But she definitely preferred performing her warrior duties to being in the nursery, so she often left the three kits under the care of Ferncloud and Daisy while she went out on patrol. Still, they also had plenty of other kits to play with, so it never bothered them all that much.

"There's still Icekit and Foxkit." Lionkit murmured, although even he wasn't sure his suggestion was a good one. The other kits in the den were much younger than he and his siblings, so they spent most of their days just sleeping. The few times they did play Ferncloud would complain about the older kits being too rough on them.

"No way Lionkit, we need something important to do. We'll be apprentices in a moon, we need to do more than tip toe around tiny kits." Hollykit scoffed, clearly getting an idea or at least an impulse of something to so. She took a step out of the den, looking around at the clearing for a moment before turning to look back at her brothers. "Come on! The ceremony is over. I'm sure we'll find something to do." With that she raced out of the den, and her brothers were left to follow her. Lionkit looked at Jaykit once to make sure they'd be going together, but, knowing he would, started sprinting away.

"Are you three going to play outside?" A voice called as they were leaving. Lionkit turned around to see Ferncloud, feeling guilty already for not asking permission first.

"Yes Ferncloud, may we?" Lionkit replied meekly.

Ferncloud paused for a moment, but her expression softened and she dipped her head in acceptance. "Off you go. And don't bother the warriors!" She called, her last phrase being nearly lost as Jaykit and Lionkit immediately raced out after their sister, approaching her as she watched the new apprentices intently.

Outside, Lionkit was hit with a burst of the fresh scents around him, brought out by the heat of the day. Firestar was sharing tongues

with Sandstorm below Highledge. Dustpelt sat with them.

"We should be thinking about expanding the warriors den," the dark tabby advised his leader. "It's crowded already, and Daisy and Sorreltail's kits won't be apprentices forever."

Nor will we! thought Lionkit, shivering with the excitement.

"Hello Dustpelt!" Hollykit called enthusiastically.

Dustpelt's eyes lit up with fondness as they met her. "Good morning Hollykit. Did you see the ceremony?"

"Yep!" She puffed out her chest. "I'll be our turn soon. It was important to see so we'll be prepared for when that time comes."

Dustpelt purred, stroking his tail along her back. "That's exactly right. But for now, I'll need you to run off and play with your brothers. I have some work to do today."

"Okay!" Hollykit dipped her head, scampering off to some other part of camp.

Brightheart and Thornclaw were grooming each other in a pool of sunlight on the other side of the clearing. Brightheart looked up, seeing the kits come out of the nursery. "Oh, Jaykit! How are you today?"

"I'm fine, of course." Jaykit replied unenthusiastically. Brightheart checked on Jaykit an awful lot, especially considering she didn't afford nearly the same amount of attention to him or Hollykit. Why was she so interested in him? Maybe she's looking for an apprentice?

"Could we go together?" Cinderpaw was asking her new mentor.

Birchfall looked between Squirrelflight and Cloudtail, before he looked back at his apprentice. "Sure, you do all need to see the territory after all."

"Yay!" The three young she-cats cheered in unison, keeping pace with each other as they ran out of the camp, their mentors trailing

behind them.

As Lionkit and his siblings surveyed the clearing, Sorreltail came up from the side of their den. "I heard you were roughhousing in the nursery." The she-cat was busy pressing leaves into the gaps in the prickly walls surrounding their den. Daisy was helping her.

"Kits will be kits." The queen purred indulgently. "You have to let them have some fun before they go off into the world." Lionkit breathed a deep breath to take in her scent. It was different from most of the other cats in the clan. She wasn't clanborn, and some of the warriors still called her a kittypet because she had once lived in the Horseplace, and eaten twoleg food. Blegh! Lionkit squirmed at the thought. Daisy wasn't a warrior, and she never really wanted to be, but her kits, Mousepaw, Hazelpaw, and Berrypaw were now the oldest apprentices in the clan, and they seemed as clanborn as anyone else.

"They won't be kits much longer." Sorreltail told Daisy knowingly, sweeping more leaves to his side with her tail. She was Cinderpaw's mom. She would know better than anyone today what it was like for kits to leave the nursery.

"All the more reason to let them enjoy themselves now." Daisy replied. Lionkit felt a wave of affection for the cream she-cat. She and Ferncloud had been the ones to warm him and his siblings when Squirrelflight had to be away from the nursery. Squirrelflight returned to her warrior duties soon after they were born. Although she still had a nest in the nursery, she used it less and less, preferring to sleep in the warriors' den where she wouldn't disturb the kits and nursing queens when she went out on patrols. And now she had an apprentice to take care of in Honeypaw, so her early morning patrols would probably only increase.

"Well since Cinderpaw, Poppypaw, and Honeypaw are gone we can't assist in their duties. Do you think the older apprentices might have something to do?" Hollykit asked, barely acknowledging that they had accompanied her outside.

"You can't mean Berrypaw. He was bad enough in the nursery but now that he's an apprentice he thinks he rules the clan!" Lionkit had

furrowed his features into a frown as he thought of the apprentice. Berrykit always used to tease him when they were young, talking up how great a warrior he would be and taunting Lionkit into fighting him. The cream tom got him into a lot of trouble before he went to the apprentices' den.

"No, actually I was thinking all of them, but maybe Hazelpaw? At least she pays more attention to her duties than either of her brothers. I bet she could point us to some job or another we could do around camp."

"What's there to do around here?" Jaykit piped up for the first time in the conversation. "There are warriors and apprentices here all the time taking care of whatever needs to be done. When have they ever needed kits to pitch in too?"

"We'll be pitching in in just a moon when we're apprentices, why don't we get a head start now?" Hollykit shot back before starting off towards the gray and white she-cat at the edge of the clearing. "Hazelpaw, we were wondering if there's anything the clan might need help with. Icekit and Foxkit are sleeping so we were hoping to help you with some of your duties."

"Oh, sorry." Hazelpaw began, although she didn't really show any regret on her face. "I'm not working around camp today. Dustpelt is taking me on a patrol with some other warriors near the top border. Last night's patrol reported fox scent inside our territory. We're going to drive it out." She certainly wasn't as much of a stupid furrball as Berrypaw, but Hazelpaw definitely matched her mentor's tone. Both of them could bore Lionkit out of his mind before they'd finished telling him anything.

"That's fine Hazelpaw. We'll find something to do. Thanks anyway." Hollykit replied as Hazelpaw went to meet up with Dustpelt. She heaved a sigh, clearly more disappointed than she had let on.

At that moment, Leafpool emerged from the elder's den with a wad of moss and herbs in her mouth. "Hey Leafpool! Do you need any help sorting herbs?" He asked. It's not exactly fun, but it's something to do. Lionkit thought to himself. Plus, it'll make Hollykit happy, helping the clan and all that.

Leafpool padded over to them, dropping the herbs at her feet so she could speak. "Sorry," Leafpool murmured. "I've just finished my chores around camp for a while. I was just about to go out and collect some more. With a green-leaf this hot, I don't want the herbs to fry before they can even get to camp."

"Can we go with you?" Lionkit mewed, his face warping into a pleading expression. No cat had ever said yes before, but he just couldn't wait another moon to be out in the territory: climbing trees, running through grass, scaring off mangey trespassers, and seeing the lake! Brambleclaw told him that the lake was like a puddle, but absolutely giant. He bet it was twice the size of the camp!

With a pitying smile, Leafpool shook her head. "In a moon maybe, when you're apprentices. But until then, you'll just have to find things to do in camp. Cinderpaw, Poppypaw, and Honeypaw managed it." Lionkit sighed, but he knew what she was saying. He and his siblings were the kits of Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight, which meant their mother was Firestar's daughter, and their father was one of the strongest warriors in the clan. Even though Leafpool was family too, she couldn't give them preferential treatment. Well, he didn't need any special treatment. He just needed to be out in the forest as soon as possible. Six whole moons spent in one tiny camp was torture!

"Nice try Lionkit." Hollykit mewed, the sarcasm dripping from her voice. "But there was no chance Leafpool was ever going to let us out of camp."

"Leafpool's always trying to butter us up with wool or honeycomb. But she never gives us what we really want." Jaykit muttered.

Hollykit sighed. Lionkit knew she wanted to see the territory just as badly as he or Jaykit did, but she wouldn't dare risk getting in trouble with Ferncloud. "We must stick to the warrior code. And it says us leaving camp right now is forbidden. We'll have to think of something else to do." With a dismissive shrug, she continued. "You never know. While we're working, the fox might head this way, and if they do I bet we could smell them first—especially with Jaykit helping."

"You're just as bad as Brambleclaw," Jaykit snapped. "Stop trying to pretend we're important to the clan when we're not."

Hollykit kneaded the ground with her forepaws. "We will be important one day," she vowed.

Lionkit suddenly stood up and turned in an excited circle, his tail fluffing out. "We'll be important today!" he declared. "We're going to chase those fox cubs off Thunderclan territory ourselves!" He realized after mentioning it he didn't really think about the words before he said them. Still, fighting a fox would be both fun and helpful for the clan, it was perfect!

"Are you mouse-brained?" Jaykit growled from behind them. "The fox is outside of camp. We were just told we're not allowed out of camp, and we have no clue how to find it even if we got out!"

"It's over by the top border. Hazelpaw said so." Lionkit replied with a levity in his tone that was completely absent from his siblings' speech.

"And we don't know where that is. We've never been shown the territory. Aside from that, as I just pointed it's against the warrior code for kits to leave camp before their sixth moon. Can you imagine what Ferncloud or Squirrelflight would think?" Hollykit cut in again.

"Well yeah, but can you imagine what they'd say if we actually took down the fox? We might be made apprentices on the spot!" Lionkit cried enthusiastically. But Hollykit didn't seem as convinced. "It'll protect Icekit and Foxkit too."

"What are you three up to?" A voice came from behind them, from Firestar's loyal deputy.

"We're just talking Brackenfur." Lionkit replied.

"I've never known you three to 'just talk'."

"Well we were just talking with Hazelpaw, asking if there was anything we could do to help around camp." Hollykit stood tall, glancing towards her brother and narrowing her eyes. She's trying

to cover for me, so we can find something else to do. Lionkit realized. But that's silly. We already have something to do! Going after the fox!

"Well I'm sorry but I'm not sure there is much you can do. I would have told you to help Leafpool but she's out gathering herbs right now. You can still play with each other though." Brackenfur's voice was smooth, with a lower volume to his voice than Firestar and many of the warriors used.

"If she's gone, could we play in front of her den?" Jaykit asked, seemingly catching on to Lionkit's plan. Of course! The dirt-place is over by Leafpool's den!. If we're playing over there, we can sneak out! Jaykit rolled his eyes, letting out a nearly inaudible sigh at something. Wasn't he excited?

"That sounds fine, as long as you don't mess with her herbs. She needs them to be organized so she can get to things when she needs them."

Lionkit smiled widely, getting increasingly more excited about this opportunity. "We won't!" he shouted. Brackenfur nodded in acceptance and padded away to talk with Sorreltail. Lionkit looked around at his siblings. This was going to be so much fun!

Lionkit slid under a bush, staying relatively quiet aside from the noise his tail was making as it crashed against the leaves. His siblings followed behind, Hollykit taking the rear this time, her face pensive. Deciding they were free to go, Lionkit stealthily crept around a tree, and sprinted to the next one so he wouldn't be spotted.

"Are you sure we're going the right way? It seems like we're heading downhill." Hollykit piped up. She and her brother were following behind him, not doing as well at the stealth part of this adventure as he was.

"Of course we're going the right way. Can't you smell that scared fox scent in the air?"

"You don't know what a fox even smells like Lionkit." Jaykit

growled. "And the ground has definitely been sloping down." The young gray tom turned around, tasting the air, probably for any sign of the fox. "This way." He stated simply as he turned and began walking in precisely the opposite direction.

"I'd follow him." Hollykit had a smug look on her face as she lifted her chin up and began strutting after Jaykit. "He has the best nose of any of us." Lionkit huffed, hanging his head low as he drifted behind them. His siblings could be so bossy! But he couldn't get too mad. They were tracking a fox. How cool was that?

They continued onward, scouring the area ahead for any sign of this fox. According to Daisy they were bigger than cats, and they always had longer ears and fluffier tails. It shouldn't be too hard to spot.

"Can you two smell that?" Jaykit piped up. Knowing his brother might be onto something, Lionkit took a larger sniff of the air. It was faint, but there was definitely a smell there that he hadn't ever smelled before, and it made him recoil his nose in disgust.

"Eugh!" He cried instinctively.

"It's the fox! We must be getting close." Hollykit stated, as if she knew any better than Lionkit what a fox smelled like.

"Can you see it?" Jaykit asked.

"...No" Hollykit murmured after a moment. But suddenly she let out a squeak and ducked down behind a bush. "But I do see the patrol!" She whispered. "They're heading further away from camp, and us."

"That's the wrong way." Jaykit stated matter-of-factly. "We've definitely caught the fox's trail over here." The gray tabby tom continued onward, uphill this time, but Lionkit paused to look at the patrol heading the other way. He could see Hazelpaw trotting along behind her mentor, while Dustpelt and Whitewing followed Sandstorm, who seemed to be leading the patrol. But the most eye-catching part was that right behind Sandstorm, he could catch the broad dark tabby haunches of his father. Even if Jaykit was right and the patrol was going the wrong way right now, today Brambleclaw would likely be fighting a fox, slashing and snapping

at it with a ferocity that would absolutely send that beast running with its tail between its legs. Lionkit's eyes shone at the thought of it, but there was another option. He might be able to scare off the fox first.

Realizing that his littermates had gone on ahead, Lionkit scampered off. As he caught up with them, his pace slowed and they all began sneaking through the brush, navigating around a trail of thorns, crinkly leaves, and the rank stench they were following. But soon, they approached a den where the fox scent was the strongest. The three kits crouched behind a patch of bracken as they surveyed the area.

"Wait here." Hollykit ordered, moving to go out towards the den.

"Why?" Lionkit asked sharply. There was no way Hollykit was leaving him behind to fight the fox herself.

"I just want to get a look." She responded firmly.

"I'm coming too." Lionkit insisted.

"If all three of us went blundering into that den, the fox would sense our presence and we wouldn't have surprise on our side when we attack."

She did have a point, he supposed. But even if this was a pre-battle stealth move, Hollykit shouldn't be the one to do it. She didn't even really want to go on this mission, not like he did at least. "My golden fur will blend in better than your black."

"What about me?" Jaykit piped in.

"We wouldn't attack the fox without you," Hollykit promised. "But we need to know what we're facing before we fight. You and I will wait here while Lionkit finds a safe way into the den." Lionkit was surprised. She didn't even argue for it. She just gave him the assignment. Well, he wasn't going to press her on it! Immediately he snuck off around the clearing, looking for any holes in the wall of the den. There was a large one in the front, but right inside he could see a huge orange creature: definitely the fox. There had to be

a better way in. He crept further around, to the opposite side of the clearing of his siblings, and found a much smaller hole, one he had almost missed. It was coated in bracken, and didn't look like it was often used, but it was large enough for him and his siblings to get in. Perfect.

He could just see it. They would stalk in through the entrance and pounce on the fox in its own den! It would be so scared that it would run away from the clans forever, and he would be a hero to his clan! Hollykit and Jaykit would be celebrated too, of course. But none of that will happen if I don't ever tell them about the back entrance. Trying desperately, to avoid any crackling sticks or leaves on the ground, Lionkit made his way back to where his siblings were waiting, pushing through the bracken they were crouching behind and shaking out his fur as Hollykit looked at him intently.

"The main entrance to the den is right behind this clump," Lionkit whispered, realizing they were waiting for him to speak. "But there's a smaller entrance on the other side of the lump of earth—probably an escape route—that leads into the back."

"And the fox is inside?" Jaykit asked.

"Yep! And if we rush in through the back, the surprise will be enough to flush it out of the den. Then we can chase it all the way to the border!"

"And which way is the border?" Hollykit asked, skeptical.

Lionkit snorted impatiently. "There'll be a border whichever way we drive them!" he snapped. "Thunderclan territory doesn't go on forever. Let's get on with it, before Sandstorm's patrol finds them and takes all the glory."

He surged away into the bracken before either Jaykit or Hollykit could reply again. He led them up the slope, out of the bracken, and over the top of the leaf-strewn mound of earth. "The escape route is here," he announced, skidding to a halt.

"It's no bigger than a rabbit hole!" Hollykit mewed in surprise.

"Maybe that's what it used to be," Lionkit answered. "And who cares, so long as we can fit down it?" It might even be better, since the fox couldn't escape out that way. "Come on, just hurry!" He could hear pawsteps growing louder. The patrol was probably nearby.

Jaykit plunged into the hole and Lionkit and Hollykit followed behind, single file since that's all the hole allowed for. Being closer than he had been before, Lionkit realized just how large that fox was. He could feel Jaykit shaking in front of him and immediately felt awful for not stopping his brother from going first.

"Let's get out of here!" Jaykit screeched. All three kits ran as fast as they could out of the den, their fur being scraped through the brambles as they bolted away. Lionkit began to hear hisses and thuds from behind them. The patrol must have come to fight the fox! Thank Starclan! But then a wail came from behind him and Hollykit. He stopped short, turning around to see Jaykit lying unconscious at the bottom of a hole. Worse yet, he could see the bright white pelt of Whitewing coming in their direction.

"Just what are you three doing here?" She growled.

Chapter 2

"What were you thinking? " Hollykit winced at Ferncloud's growl, sneaking a quick glare at Lionkit before looking back at the floor in shame.

"Thank Starclan Jaykit wasn't hurt even worse from that fall but all of you were in serious danger! A fox cub would have been enough to tear you to pieces, let alone a full grown fox!" Ferncloud's green eyes were contorted into a frosty glare, but Hollykit noticed the worry behind them as well. She loves us, and we disobeyed the warrior code, putting ourselves in a lot of danger in the process...She was scared for us. A long moment of silence passed between them, interrupted only by some murmurs outside and Squirrelflight coming into the den to join Ferncloud.

"Well?" Ferncloud asked curtly. "That wasn't rhetorical. I want an answer from both of you. What in Starclan's name made you think going after a fox on your own was a good idea?" After another moment of silence, the gray she-cat sighed, although Hollykit couldn't tell if it was a matter of easing her frustrations or just filling up the silent space.

"We were trying to protect the clan." Lionkit finally murmured.

"And what good would three dead kits do to protect the clan?" Squirrelflight growled, though her face softened much quicker than Ferncloud's. "One day, I know you three will be great warriors, and you can protect the clan then. But a real warrior doesn't go looking for trouble when it's too much for them."

Hollykit nodded, slowly breathing to try easing the lump that had formed in her stomach. "I know. We won't do it again."

"Is Firestar going to delay our apprentice ceremony?" Lionkit squeaked, fear edging his voice. "I don't want to wait even longer!" If you were so worried about the punishment, maybe you shouldn't have insisted on going out of camp to chase down a fox! Hollykit

glared at him, a growl nearly forming in her throat. If he hadn't suggested it in the first place, Ferncloud wouldn't be upset now.

Squirrelflight shook her head, but she kept her gaze firm. "No, but he is assigning you camp duties for a quarter moon. You won't be playing through sunhigh and you certainly won't have time to come up with more adventures."

Hollykit couldn't believe it. They're punishment was what she had wanted to do all along?

"What about Jaykit?" Lionkit asked.

At this question, Squirrelflight finally dropped her gaze, though Hollykit caught a moment where it became laced with pity. Instead, Ferncloud stepped up to answer. "Your brother has been through a lot, and is still healing. He's learned his lesson without these duties."

The appalled gasp Lionkit gave off clearly displayed how upset he was that they were getting punishment without Jaykit, but Hollykit couldn't be happier. "What duties are we supposed to do today?" She asked, trying to keep her voice even to avoid showing her excitement.

"Checking the elder's for ticks." Squirrelflight replied. "You can get the mouse bile from Leafpool, then meet Berrypaw in the elder's den. He'll show you how it's done."

Lionkit was already groaning, out loud at that. Of course he cared more about who he would have to do his chores with than the work they were doing for the clan. It was a wonder he could be convinced to do work at all. But, other than a narrowed gaze, Ferncloud seemed to be ignoring it this time.

Hollykit stood up, "I'll get the mouse bile" she stood, looking back towards her brother before she exited the den. "You can head on to the elder's den." No cat really wanted to carry the mouse bile, but it was the job that only one cat had to do, so she would be that one. Besides, it would give Lionkit more time with Berrypaw, which was just the comeuppance he needed, and she could get the chance to see how Jaykit was doing.

The black she-cat trotted out of the den, although it slowed to a walk as she met the gazes of her clanmates. Sorreltail and Brackenfur were looking at her with wide, frightened eyes, Ashfur began muttering to Spiderleg and Thornclaw as she passed, and even Stormfur and Brook, who tended to stay out of clan affairs beyond their duties, gave her a quick glance of pity before they turned away. She wanted to work for the clan but...this was admittedly not how she imagined the reception.

Hollykit nosed her way through the brambles into the shadows of Leafpool's den. Jaykit was lying by the pool at one side of the den. He turned his blue eyes on her as she entered.

"Hi, Hollykit." His mew sounded tired. His pelt was slicked flat with poultices, making him look as small as a newborn. Hollykit felt a stab of pain. What we did was really dangerous.

Jaykit flicked his tail. "There's no need to feel so sorry for me," he mewed.

Hollykit blinked. How was it that her brother always knew exactly what she was thinking about him? Sometimes it could be so annoying to have him sniffing out her private thoughts like an inquisitive mouse.

"So what did Squirrelflight say?" Jaykit asked.

"We have camp duties for the next quarter moon, but otherwise they're letting us off with a warning." Hollykit told him. "Oh, but you don't have to do them of course. You're healing."

"I haven't turned into a piece of fresh-kill." He growled.

Leafpool was mixing herbs in the far corner of her den. "He really is healing well. I've been giving him comfrey to chew on." Leaving her work, she joined the two kits. "But that doesn't mean he can go prancing about camp before he's well again. We don't want his ceremony being delayed by a reopened or infected wound."

"Is that what you were mixing there?" Hollykit asked. "His comfrey?"

"I like to mix in a few heather flowers when I have them," Leafpool explained. "The nectar sweetens the mixture and makes it easier to swallow."

"How did you learn all that?" Hollykit mewed, genuinely curious.

"Cinderpelt taught me," Leafpool answered. There was sadness in her voice as she spoke about her mentor, but Hollykit was more interested in Leafpool's skill. Having so much knowledge must have made her feel very powerful—no other cat in the clan knew herbs like she did. She had been curing countless cats on her own before Hollykit and her siblings were being born, and now she was helping Jaykit effortlessly. Imagine being that important to the clan.

"Leafpool?" Brightheart called from the den entrance. "There was a thorn in Icekit's nest; Ferncloud needs your help."

"I'll get you some marigold. You can just lick the scratch and put some of that on." Leafpool replied, turning to Hollykit before she went back into her stores. "Can you see to Jaykit for me, Hollykit? A wash will help his stiffness. Just avoid the poultice patches."

"Okay." Hollykit wrinkled her nose at the thought of putting her tongue near the tangy-smelling goo plastered over her brother's pelt. But she began to wash him anyway as Leafpool fetched a few leaves of what Hollykit could assume was marigold from the back of the den and gave it to Brightheart.

"Not so roughly!" Jaykit complained. "I'm sore all over."

"Sorry," Hollykit apologized, lapping Jaykit's pelt with softer strokes.

"You're not as gentle as Spottedleaf," Jaykit moaned.

Hollykit stopped licking. "Who?"

"Spottedleaf," Jaykit repeated. "Leafpool says she's one of our warrior ancestors. She came to me in a dream and poked me all over with her nose."

"How can you dream about a cat if you've never met her?" Hollykit

asked, puzzled.

Leafpool padded back from the den entrance and sat down. "Are you telling Hollykit about Spottedleaf?"

Jaykit nodded.

"Who is she?" Hollykit mewed.

"She was the Thunderclan medicine cat when Firestar first joined the clan," Leafpool explained. "She died before I was born, but she comes to my dreams just like she did with Jaykit." Hollykit noticed that the medicine cat's eyes were glittering with excitement. "Spottedleaf was very wise. She's never stopped looking after her clan. "

"Why did she visit Jaykit?"

"Starclan tends to come to cats when they are in trouble, to give them a push to keep going, or show which direction to head."

"Do you get visits from other cats? Like Cinderpelt?" Hollykit knew that Cinderpelt was the previous medicine cat, so she must have been Leafpool's mentor at some point. They were probably close when Cinderpelt was still alive.

Leafpool dipped her head. "It's usually Spottedleaf. She helps me find the answers to questions that are worrying me, and she warns me if something threatens the clan. Though I do get to talk to other warriors when something especially important comes up."

Hollykit was surprised to hear the warmth Leafpool seemed to seemed to exude for a cat she had never really met. "You talk about Spottedleaf like she's a friend."

"Our warrior ancestors can be our friends."

Jaykit let out a moan of pain.

"I'll fetch more comfrey," Hollykit offered. She bounded over to the pile of herbs and carried a mouthful back to Leafpool.

"Thank you," Leafpool meowed. "Can you fetch some poppy seeds, too? You'll see them at the back. They're tiny, round black seeds."

"Okay." Hollykit hurried to the back of the den and searched among the piles of herbs until she found the poppy seeds. "How many?" she called.

"Five," Leafpool answered. "Pick them up by wetting your paw and dabbing the pile."

Hollykit followed her instructions, shaking the extra seeds from her pad, and hopped back to where Jaykit lay. He licked them from her paw, his eyes growing sleepy.

"Is he all right?" she asked, worried.

"He will be," Leafpool reassured her. "But we should let him rest."

Hollykit knew she was supposed to be here just for mouse bile, but she didn't want to leave Leafpool or the medicine den. Excitement was buzzing in her paws. Leafpool could cure sick cats, and share tongues with her ancestors, and warn the clan leader of troubles ahead. If Hollykit wanted to be important to her clan, perhaps becoming a medicine cat was the way to achieve it. When she saw the foxes, she just froze and ran. That wasn't the bravery a warrior needed to succeed. And maybe if she was a medicine cat, she could command enough respect to stop Lionkit from pulling off more stupid adventures.

"Leafpool," she called quietly.

"Yes?" Leafpool padded to her side.

"When do medicine cats take on an apprentice? Is it only when they get old?"

Leafpool looked seriously at her. "I can take an apprentice anytime."

"But would your apprentice have to stay an apprentice until you..." Died? Hollykit could not bring herself to say the word out loud.

Leafpool's whiskers twitched with amusement as she guessed what

Hollykit was trying to ask. "No," she purred. "Once a medicine cat apprentice has learned enough, he can take his proper name and assume full responsibilities, even with his mentor still alive."

"Do you have someone in mind already?" Hollykit asked, her voice instinctively rising as she grew more excited about the question she was about to propose.

Leafpool flicked the tip of her tail. "I've not decided anything yet."

Before Hollykit could say anything else, she heard Ferncloud calling from outside. She was definitely late,

"Oh, I-I was supposed to come here for mouse bile." Hollykit murmured, her pelt prickling with frustration. After a quick search Leafpool had found her the foul tasting stuff on some moss, and she pushed through the bramble entrance and raced towards the elder's den. To her surprise though, she wasn't greeted with an angry scolding for taking too long. It seemed Mothwing and Willowpaw were visiting! Quickly, she ran across the clearing, stopping in front of the gray Riverclan apprentice.

Willowpaw, who had been looking troubled, brightened up. "Hello, Hollykit!" she purred. "Or is it Hollypaw now?"

"Not yet," Hollykit told her. "Why are you here?" The Riverclan cats weren't carrying anything. Perhaps they had come to ask for advice rather than to trade supplies this time?

Willowpaw's whiskers twitched. "I had a dream," she mewed. "I want Leafpool to help me interpret it."

"Can't Mothwing do that?" Hollykit asked, confused.

Willowpaw glanced at her paws. "Mothwing suggested we get Leafpool's opinion."

"What was it about?"

Willowpaw looked solemn. "I can't tell you until I've shared it with Leafpool." Medicine cats had such a huge responsibility, interpreting messages from Starclan to guide their clan correctly.

Sometimes when Willowpaw talked about her dreams, it felt like they were on different planes.

"Mothwing, Willowpaw!" Leafpool stood at the entrance to the medicine den, calling affectionately. "Welcome! Come in!" She waited, holding back the trailing brambles, while Mothwing and Willowpaw wove past her into the shadows beyond. Hollykit stared wistfully after them as the leaves swished back into place. Not only were they strong and important, but they had a code of their own. Medicine cats could form friendships across borders like no other cat could. She felt a nudge in her flank and turned to see Lionkit butting her gently with his head.

"Why are you staring at them like a dumb rabbit?" he mewed. "Mothwing and Willowpaw have visited the camp before."

Hollykit was unable to keep her wish to herself a moment longer. "I want to be a medicine cat!" she blurted out.

"A medicine cat?" Lionkit stared at Hollykit, bewildered. "Why?"

"There are other ways to serve your clan apart from being a warrior," Hollykit snapped.

"But you'll be stuck in the camp, in that cramped stinky den with all the sick and injured cats instead of out in the forest hunting or fighting." There was no criticism in Lionkit's tone, only disbelief. Hollykit didn't want to hear about what she would be missing.

"But think how much I'll know," she pointed out. "I'll learn all about healing herbs, and I'll be able to share dreams with Starclan." She stared at him, willing him to understand. "What could be more exciting than that?"

"Fighting Shadowclan?"

"But I want to have dreams just like Leafpool and Willowpaw!" Hollykit insisted.

"You already do," Lionkit purred, his eyes glinting with amusement. "Dreams about hedgehogs!"

"You cheeky kit!" Hollykit squeaked in mock anger. With a small leap, she pushed Lionkit to the ground and began to tussle with him.

"Excuse me? Do you plan to take care of your chores this moon, or shall I come back later?" Berrypaw's condescension dripped off his words as he spoke from the entrance to the elder's den.

"Of course!" Hollykit piped up, racing into the den. When Willowpaw was done talking to Leafpool, Hollykit would ask to be her apprentice.

"Oh thank you. " Berrypaw replied sarcastically. "Now," He puffed up his chest, dropping the clumps of mouse-bile coated moss in front of the apprentices and apparently expecting to just lead them with his voice. "Listen closely, Lionkit. We wouldn't want you missing something." She felt her brother bristle beside her. "When you're picking out ticks you want to parse through every inch of fur, particularly near the neck and tail. If you don't look carefully, you may miss one, and Starclan forbid that happens."

Berrypaw continued on in his lesson but Hollykit was too excited to listen. She got the basic idea and began looking through the fur on Longtail. He looked surprisingly young, at least compared to Mousefur. But that makes sense. She realized. Longtail didn't retire out of age, but because of scarring to his eyes rendering him unable to see. He probably would have been a warrior for many more moons if not for the injury.

"I can't believe we have to listen to him." Lionkit grumbled.

Hollykit looked outside to see that at last the brambles twitched and Leafpool led Mothwing and Willowpaw out into the clearing. Hollykit glanced back at Lionkit, plucking ticks from Longtail's tail, and Berrypaw, proudly standing watch over them and seemingly shooting daggers with his eyes.

"Sorry Berrypaw I have to talk to Leafpool! I'll be right back promise!" She hurried all the words out and as quickly as possible, before Berrypaw could respond, she slithered out under the bramble wall of the den, dislodging a wad of leaves that Sorreltail had

pressed into place the day before. I'll fix it later, Hollykit vowed as she scooted across the clearing.

"Hello!" she mewed to Willowpaw.

Willowpaw's ears twitched. She blinked at Hollykit, and the faraway look cleared from her gaze. "Hi," she mewed.

"Did Leafpool help you?"

Willowpaw nodded. "I can tell you about the dream now, if you still want to know."

Hollykit flicked her tail excitedly. "Yes, please."

"Well," Willowpaw began, "I dreamed that clouds were streaming across the sky, flowing and tumbling across the blue. And then they stopped and the sun scorched down onto the Riverclan camp, shriveling the plants and drying up the nests until there was no shelter from the burning heat."

Hollykit shuddered. "What did it mean?"

"Leafpool thought it could be a warning of trouble with our water supply. But there's been plenty of rain this green-leaf, so it probably doesn't mean a drought. She advised me to tell Leopardstar to check all the streams near the camp and make sure they are safe."

Hollykit leaned forward. "How did you become Mothwing's apprentice?" she asked.

"I helped her with some of her patients when there was an outbreak of illness," Willowpaw told her. "I enjoyed the tasks she gave me, so I just kept going back to the medicine den and helping out until Mothwing suggested I should become her apprentice."

"Did you always want to be a medicine cat?"

"I didn't really think about it," Willowpaw admitted. "It just sort of happened, and then I couldn't imagine doing anything else. Being a medicine cat is great!"

Hollykit opened her mouth to agree, but before she could speak, Mothwing called her apprentice away. "Willowpaw, we're leaving."

Mothwing brushed muzzles with Leafpool and headed for the thorn tunnel. Willowpaw bounded after her. "Bye, Hollykit!" she called over her shoulder.

Hollykit watched the two cats disappear through the tunnel. Willowpaw had made her even more determined to be Leafpool's apprentice. She would do her duties later to fulfill her punishment. Right now, she had something more important to do. She hurried after Leafpool, following her into her den.

"Hello again Hollykit. Do you need more mouse bile?" Looking up at Leafpool, the question fizzed on the tip of her tongue, but she was struggling for the right words. She glanced over at Jaykit, still asleep in his nest.

"Is something wrong?" When Hollykit again didn't answer, Leafpool sat down in front of her. "Alright," she mewed. "Tell me what's troubling you."

"Nothing's wrong," Hollykit answered at once. "But I have something important to tell you."

A look close to alarm flashed momentarily across Leafpool's gaze. "What?"

Hollykit took a deep breath. "I want to be your apprentice!" She tensed as she waited for the reply. What if Leafpool refused to take her on?

Leafpool looked stunned. "I never would have thought—" She stopped mid-sentence, then meowed gently, "Being a medicine cat is a big commitment. You will rarely fight in battles or go on patrol. You won't be able to take a mate, or have kits." Hollykit saw her eyes darken with sadness. Was that regret she saw in their amber depths? There was no time to wonder before the medicine cat went on. "What has made you want to be a medicine cat?"

"I want to be able to help the clan," Hollykit told her. "If I were a

medicine cat, I could heal my clanmates when they get sick and I could share dreams with Starclan." Leafpool was still gazing at her questioningly, so she went on. "As a warrior I could feed the clan and defend it—I would die to protect the clan if I had to—but as a warrior I would be limited to fighting with tooth and claw. As a medicine cat I could fight with all the knowledge and power of Starclan. What better way could there be to serve Thunderclan?" She stopped, breathless, and stared hopefully up at Leafpool.

Leafpool's tail twitched. "Those are all good reasons," she agreed.

Hollykit's heart soared. Was she going to say yes?

"But," Leafpool went on, "before I can make a decision, I must talk with Firestar."

Hollykit blinked, feeling a flash of doubt. But she pushed the doubt away. She hasn't said no. "Thanks, Leafpool!" she mewed. She turned and trotted from the den. Of course Leafpool would have to talk to the clan leader before making such an important decision, she thought as she bounced back across the clearing.

This time she headed straight for the elder's den, and found Lionkit still hard at work and with no Berrypaw to guide him anymore.

"Did you actually ask her?" Lionkit asked through a mouthful of no-doubt putrid bile-coated moss.

"Of course."

"Did she say yes?"

"Not exactly. She's got to talk to Firestar first, of course."

"Well if you want to be stuck in that stuffy medicine den all day worrying about sick cats and sorting through leaves, I'm rooting for you. But I'm going to be a warrior." Lionkit scoffed, turning back to Mousefur and nipping a particularly tight tick from under her fur.

"We all are, Hollykit." Mousefur meowed, though it was interrupted by a grunt of pain as the tick came free. "I'm sure you'd make a fine medicine cat. If you could just stop running off with your brothers

and getting in trouble." The old she-cat seemed remarkably friendly in her teasing but Hollykit was still hit with a twinge of guilt.

"Jaykit and I can protect your den when the camp is attacked!" Lionkit piped up. Mousefur's expression immediately turned somber, and she shared a look with Longtail.

"You two must know that Jaykit...might not be able to become a warrior in the same way as you could, Lionkit." Longtail spoke up from the back of the den, his gaze fixed on something behind them that Hollykit couldn't see.

Lionkit looked at the old warrior with a mix of shock and anger. "Why not? He's just as agile and passionate, and he has a better sense of smell then any other kit who came through the nursery! He probably smells better than anyone in the clan!"

"Yes dear but..." Mousefur cut in. "There are certain things that warriors have to be able to do, and he can't." Hollykit could tell she was putting it as delicately as possible, but Lionkit was right. It was silly that Firestar would even consider not letting Jaykit become a warrior. He was just as capable as any other cat. It was just bad luck that landed him with more scratches than she or Lionkit when they were running from the fox. When he was healed and they could all become apprentices together, she was sure he would prove that.

Chapter 3

Jaykit, you must know you can never become an ordinary apprentice like Hollykit or Lionkit. Leafpool's words rang in his ears again. At the time, it had felt like a gale had swept him up and he could hear nothing but the rushing of wind in his ears. He must have shown his dismay somehow, because Leafpool responded. I thought you understood...

Jaykit immediately whipped around to face her. Understood what? That I'm not good enough to fight for my clan? But now that Hollykit was becoming a medicine cat apprentice, Firestar had to let him train as a warrior right? He wouldn't just make Jaykit an elder immediately...

"Good morning!" Squirrelflight called from across the clearing. Jaykit could scent Brambleclaw next to her, and from the rhythmatic gentle sounds coming from his direction he appeared to be washing his ears

"Hi!" Hollykit and Lion mewed, trotting over excitedly to greet them. Jaykit followed behind, not quite as quickly but still moving.

Brambleclaw purred loudly. "It's your big day!" A few moments passed with pawstep sounds in between as Brambleclaw went to Lionkit, Hollykit, and finally Jaykit, touching his nose to their foreheads.

"Yep!" Lionkit replied. Jaykit could almost hear what he was thinking. This is it! The best day of my life! Of course his brother didn't even consider that this might not be a good day for everyone.

Jaykit heard a bunch of heavier pawsteps getting louder, and a moment later the thorn barrier rustled; the dawn patrol was returning. Cloudtail's scent was the first he smelled, but soon after came Poppypaw, his apprentice, with Stormfur and Whitewing soon after. They had a strong mix of scents on their pelts, meaning they probably went to both clan borders this morning. Brackenfur must

have intercepted them, as his voice came from the entrance a moment later.

"All clear?" He asked.

"No cat has crossed the boundaries," Cloudtail reported. "Although Windclan is keeping their markers fresh."

Brambleclaw tensed against Jaykit's fur and Squirrelflight's breathing quickened. Clearly neither of them were happy about this development.

"Do you think that's a problem?" Brackenfur asked.

Cloudtail looked thoughtful. "No, but it feels as if they're making an effort to remind us that they're there."

"You think they're showing signs of aggression?"

"Not aggression," Cloudtail corrected. "But they never used to be so thorough about marking their boundaries."

"Should we be stepping up patrols?" Ashfur's voice suddenly came from near the entrance to the warrior's den making Jaykit jump. He made his way toward Cloudtail and Brackenfur, and Squirrelflight and Brambleclaw followed behind, leaving the kits alone.

"We can ignore it for now" Brambleclaw stated.

"Isn't that a decision for Firestar to make?" Ashfur meowed.

A moment of silence passed, and Jaykit could tell the two warriors were locked on each other, something unseen passing between them.

Brambleclaw was the one who broke it. "Firestar and Brackenfur will make the ultimate decision, of course," he meowed. "But there's no point overreacting if Windclan is just trying to remind us they're there."

Jaykit assumed someone agreed, because none of the warriors said anything else and instead broke off to various places around camp.

Spiderleg went to join Thornclaw and Ashfur beside a boulder and they sat down to have some prey, pigeon, he guessed from the smell. Cloudtail let his apprentice go and padded over to sit with Brightheart. Poppypaw, having been dismissed, ran over to join a game of play fighting with Cinderpaw and Honeypaw in the grass outside their den. But suddenly all the noise paused and died out. In the silence, Jaykit heard pawsteps on the highledge, and soon enough Firestar's voice rang out across the clearing.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Highledge."

Jaykit's littermates were jittering with excitement as they all stepped up to the front of the crowd. It was finally their turn, assuming Firestar was in fact going to make all of them apprentices.

Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight hurried toward them. Squirrelflight could soon be heard smoothing the fur between Lionkit's ears.

"Are you ready?" Brambleclaw's asked.

"Absolutely!" Hollykit mewed before Jaykit could respond.

"Good."

Squirrelflight licked Jaykit's cheek. "Good luck, all of you." With that she and Brambleclaw padded away, leaving the three of them alone at the front of the clearing.

"I gather you all for one of my favorite duties," Firestar announced. "Hollykit, Lionkit, and Jaykit have reached their sixth moon." Jaykit's name was included. He was going to be an apprentice after all.

The clan meowed in approval. Firestar waited for the noise to die away before going on. "Lionkit!"

His brother immediately bounced forward.

"From this day until you receive your warrior name, you will be Lionpaw. I ask StarCcan to watch over you and guide you until you find in your paws the strength and courage of a warrior."

"Ashfur," Firestar called. "You mentored Birchfall, and he is a credit to his clan with an apprentice of his own. Now Thunderclan asks you to prove yourself once more a great mentor and make Lionpaw a warrior the clan can be proud of."

Ashfur's voice now came from the front of the clearing, beside Lionpaw. "I won't let Thunderclan down," Ashfur promised.

"Hollykit," Firestar announced. Hollykit was becoming an apprentice first? Since she was becoming a medicine cat apprentice, Jaykit had figured she would be last. "From this day until you receive your warrior name, you will be Hollypaw."

Hollypaw was almost as excited as their brother, but something still seemed to be egging on her mind. Will I be a medicine cat? "Leafpool," Firestar called. Thank Starclan. Jaykit couldn't tell if that particular remark came from himself or was just for Hollypaw's sake, but he was definitely happy for his sister.

"I know that I am putting Hollypaw in safe paws," Firestar meowed. "I pray that Starclan gives this apprentice all the strength and wisdom she will need."

"I will teach her everything I know," Leafpool promised.

A moment of silence passed, and the clan hadn't begun cheering yet. It had to be his turn. But Firestar wasn't calling his name. Jaykit marched into the clearing and stood in front of Firestar. "What about me?"

"Surely he can't become an apprentice?" Sandstorm's whispered comment hung in the still, damp air.

"Longtail moved to the elders' den when he went blind," Spiderleg murmured louder, as if he agreed that blind cats couldn't be warriors.

"He wouldn't be safe out in the forest," Birchfall put in.

"Poor mite," breathed Daisy.

Jaykit's pelt bristled. Why did no one believe he could be a warrior

like any other cat? "I want to be an apprentice like Lionpaw and Hollypaw," Jaykit spat defiantly.

"Of course you do," Firestar agreed. "From this day forward, you will be known as Jaypaw. And your mentor will be Brightheart."

Brightheart? Jaypaw felt a rush of anger so strong it almost knocked him off his paws. Why had Firestar chosen one-eyed Brightheart when there were so many other warriors to choose from? As if he couldn't guess!

He dug his claws into the earth, refusing to step forward to greet his mentor even as she came up to greet him. Her hesitation and embarrassment was clear as day but he ignored it, as well as the encouraging murmurs of the other apprentices to touch noses with his mentor.

"Brightheart," Firestar meowed, "you have never let what happened to you prevent you from being a fine warrior. I can think of no one better than you to teach Jaypaw how best to serve his clan."

"I will share with him all I have learned," Brightheart vowed.

Big deal, Jaypaw thought.

Leafpool's voice murmured in his ear. "Go on."

Gritting his teeth, he took a step towards Brightheart, beginning the eruption of cheers through the clan.

"Lionpaw! Hollypaw! Jaypaw!"

You're not really cheering for me , Jaypaw thought bitterly. There's not a cat here that thinks I'll become a great warrior. You all just proved that .

"I know it must be hard for you," Brightheart murmured sympathetically. "But I promise I will teach you how to protect your clan even without sight. We can prove them wrong, okay?"

She pitied him! He could hear it in her voice. His anger swelled up again, sending blood pounding through his ears. "Why bother if you

think I'm so useless? Why don't you just send me off to the elders' den with Longtail?" he hissed.

Brightheart stiffened. "No cat has said that you're useless. And Longtail won't thank you for your comment!" She stepped back from Jaypaw and lifted her chin. "I've asked him to help with some of your training."

Jaypaw lashed his tail. Oh, great, he thought. Let's lump all the useless cats together and hope a tree falls on them! Reluctantly, he forced himself to touch muzzles with Brightheart, accepting her as his mentor. His whiskers brushed the side of her face that had been ravaged when she had been attacked by the dog pack. It felt strange to sense space where other cats had fur and flesh, and he had to suppress a shudder.

"When can we start training?" Hollypaw asked as the clan broke up.

"That's up to your mentors," Firestar told her.

"Come on, Lionpaw," Ashfur meowed. "Let's find you a nest in the apprentices' den; then I'll show you the forest."

Hollypaw's paws pattered on the ground around Leafpool. "Can we go with Lionpaw when Ashfur shows him our territory?"

"It's a nice idea, Hollypaw," Leafpool meowed. "But I need to show you the best herb-gathering places, and I'm sure Ashfur will want to show Lionpaw the boundary markers and the best places for hunting."

"Oh." Hollypaw sounded disappointed.

"But first, let's look at the herb store," Leafpool suggested, "so you get to know some of the leaves we'll be looking at in the forest."

"Okay," Hollypaw mewed, sounding more cheerful.

As Lionpaw and Hollypaw padded after their mentors, Jaypaw sat down crossly. How come they get real mentors?

He felt Brightheart's tail touch his shoulder. "Come with me," she

meowed. Sullenly he followed her to a clump of wilting grass that overflowed from a quiet alcove in the rocky camp wall.

"I think it's best if we start..." Brightheart began. Jaypaw didn't listen to the rest. Lionpaw would be out with Ashfur by now, eagerly looking over the borders, landmarks, and prey he would soon get to conquer. And Hollypaw would be sorting through herbs in the medicine den. At least I'm not a medicine cat apprentice . He felt a flicker of gratitude that Hollypaw had taken that role.

He blinked, and his thoughts jerked back to Brightheart. She had jumped to her paws and was obviously waiting for him to say something. He flicked his tail, wondering how he could cover up the fact that he hadn't been paying attention. But she had already guessed that he had not been listening to a word.

She snorted impatiently. "We're going to see Longtail, remember?"

Jaypaw's heart sank. More pointless advice from a second-rate warrior who knew nothing about him. "Okay," he mewed unenthusiastically.

Brightheart sighed. "Come on."

Dragging his paws, he followed her across the clearing. At the entrance to the elders' den, Brightheart called through the spindly branches that brushed the ground around its edge, "It's Brightheart and Jaypaw!"

"Come in, come in," Longtail meowed.

Brightheart ducked down under the low branch entrance and padded into the space that ringed the trunk of the honeysuckle bush. Jaypaw followed, keeping his head low. From the scent, he knew Longtail was alone.

"Congratulations, Jaypaw!" Longtail purred. "Firestar has set you quite a challenge for your first apprentice, Brightheart," He remarked.

"Just because I'm blind doesn't mean—" Jaypaw began hotly.

"I wasn't referring to your sight," Longtail interrupted. "I meant your attitude." There was humor in Longtail's mew. Jaypaw may be a little prickly but he had every right to be considering how the clan was treating him! But before he could point this out, Brightheart was issuing orders.

"First I want you to clean out the moss, get rid of any dusty or dirty pieces," she instructed. "I'll fetch some fresh for now, because you don't know the best place to gather it."

Cleaning out bedding! Jaypaw knew it was a routine apprentice task—he had heard Berrypaw and Mousepaw complain about it often enough—but knowing that Lionpaw was already exploring the territory made him want to snarl.

"Then," Brightheart went on, "check Longtail for fleas and ticks, and Mousefur too, if she's back by then. While you're busy, Longtail can tell you about using other senses rather than sight."

Jaypaw wanted to wail with frustration. He was totally different from either Longtail or Brightheart. Both of them lost their sight after they had spent moons relying on it. The loss must have been devastating. But Jaypaw had never seen the world with any other senses apart from sound, scent, and touch. He wasn't used to anything else. How could either of them know what it was like? He could probably give Longtail more advice on being blind than the tom could give him—how to pick the freshest prey from the pile, how to tell where your denmates had been by the scents on their pelts...

"You might as well make a start, Jaypaw," Brightheart suggested. Was that impatience he heard in her mew?

You'll be feeling more than impatience if you keep giving me rubbish tasks like this! As Brightheart nosed her way out of the den, he began sorting through the moss, feeling with his paws for pieces that had grown dry and scratchy and sniffing for pieces that were beginning to smell stale. "This apprenticeship is going to be so dull," he hissed under his breath.

"What was that?" Mousefur had padded into the den, her pelt

smelling of the forest. Her paw steps were uneven, and she breathed in sharply as she sat down. "You've missed a bit over here," she pointed out.

"He's only just started," Longtail defended him.

Mousefur snorted. "Does that mean we'll have him scrambling around the den until sunhigh? I was hoping to get some sleep."

"It's not my fault you're stiff!" Jaypaw snapped. "You're the one that let your fur get damp."

He felt Mousefur look closely at him. "How did you know I was stiff?"

"I could tell when you sat down," Jaypaw replied, hooking out a wad of dry moss and flinging it toward the den entrance. "You moved slowly and made that noise."

"What noise?"

"A sort of gasp, like it hurt."

A purr of amusement suddenly rumbled in the old she-cat's throat. "I see Brightheart is going to have her paws full," she meowed.

Jaypaw felt a glimmer of hope. Perhaps they'll stop underestimating me quite so much once they realize it doesn't matter that I can't see. He finished sorting through the moss, then padded over to Longtail to get the ticks in his fur.

"I bet you can't wait to start training in the forest," Longtail meowed. "I remember my first time out like it was last moon." A wistful edge entered his mew. "Of course, I wasn't blind then. Everything seemed so green and fresh. But you'll still love it, even though you're blind. There are so many scents out there."

I'd kind of noticed. Jaypaw felt the hard body of a flea in the warrior's pelt.

"That's the one thing I've noticed about being blind," Longtail went on. "Scents become so much sharper and more important."

Thanks. I never would have guessed. Jaypaw cracked the flea between his teeth.

"And sounds, of course," Longtail added. "I can sometimes hear the mice moving at the top of the hollow. I never would have noticed that before. You should make sure you listen really well, all the time."

Jaypaw began to check the fur around Longtail's scruff. A tick was lodged behind the warrior's ear.

"When it comes to hunting, it'll help to have sharp hearing and smell. Prey is always hard to see, but smelling it is easy. Even when I could see, it was usually the scent or sound of prey that told me where it was hiding."

Next you'll be telling me that a fresh mouse tastes juicier than a stale one, Jaypaw thought, tugging at the tick harder than he needed to.

"Ow!" Longtail complained.

"How's it going in here?" Brightheart's voice sounded at the den entrance. "Have you finished?"

"I think so." Jaypaw looked hopefully toward Mousefur. "You don't have any ticks, do you?"

"Only one in my side, but I can reach it myself," she replied.

Jaypaw turned to his mentor. "I've finished, then."

Brightheart began bundling pawfuls of fresh moss into the den. "Good. Spread this out and then come with me," she meowed. "I'm going to show you the territory around the camp."

At last! Hollypaw and Lionpaw had been getting real training for ages.

"Good luck!" Longtail called as Jaypaw followed Brightheart out of the den.

She led him out of the camp and up the steep slope that led lakeward. "This trail leads to the top of the ridge," Brightheart explained. "It's steep."

"Okay." Jaypaw decided not to tell her that he could already feel the slope beneath his paws. He followed his mentor as she wove through the trees, feeling the damp leaves slippery underpaw.

"Watch out!" Brightheart called, but Jaypaw could smell the bark ahead of him and swerved just in time to avoid the tree, his whiskers grazing the trunk.

"The trees are thick here, but there's not too much undergrowth."

"Oh." Jaypaw breathed in the scent of a mouse trail as the ground began to flatten out.

"We're at the top of the ridge now," Brightheart told him. "Follow my scent and I'll lead you along the crest."

"Right." He could tell by the slope of the land that the forest fell away on either side; it felt as though they were climbing the spine of a great cat.

"If we go up this trail, we'll be out of the trees soon."

Jaypaw was beginning to feel out of breath, so he didn't reply. He listened to the flies buzzing around him and shook his head when they tickled his ears.

"We're out of the trees now, so don't worry about bumping into anything," Brightheart meowed. Jaypaw knew they had left the cover of the forest. A light, damp wind brushed his face.

"Stop here," Brightheart meowed. But Jaypaw had already halted, feeling the land drop steeply away at his paw tips. Scents flooded him—distant, strange smells he didn't know yet—and he could hear water lapping far below. He knew that they were looking out over the forest and lake.

"We've followed the ridge out of the forest and right up to the end," Brightheart explained. "The land slopes down steeply from here to

the lake. Riverclan territory is across the water. Over where the sun sets is Shadowclan territory. And if you look back toward where the sun rises you'll be able to see—" She broke off abruptly.

For the first time that day, Jaypaw felt sorry for his mentor. She must have hoped that her first apprentice would be a healthy kit she wouldn't have to make special allowances for. If only she realized that he didn't want any special allowances, that he didn't need them.

"I might not be able to see what you see," he told her, "but I can tell a lot from what I can hear and smell and feel." He lifted his nose. "I know Shadowclan is over there, not just because the stench of them is strong enough to scare a rabbit, but because the tang of the pines tells me there can't be much undergrowth, so the cats who hunt there must be cunning and good at stalking." He turned his head. "And over there I can smell the moorland. The wind comes in a great unbroken sweep, undisturbed by trees. The Windclan cats who live there must be fast and small to hunt in such open country." Then he gazed at the lake in front of them. "I know Riverclan live across the lake, though I can't smell their scent. It's hidden by the scents from the lake, which are stronger today because of the wind. But I know that Riverclan will feel the coming rain first because the wind is driving the waves this way—I can hear them slapping against the shore."

"You can tell all that without seeing it?"

"Yes, of course."

Suddenly Brightheart stiffened. She was listening intently, ears pricked. "A patrol is coming," she announced.

Jaypaw had heard it already. He knew from the scents that it was Dustpelt, Hazelpaw, Spiderleg, and Mousepaw, but he didn't say so out loud. He was pleased he had impressed Brightheart with his description of what was around them, but he didn't want her to think he was showing off.

"Hey!" Mousepaw bounded out from the bracken first. Spiderleg followed with Dustpelt and Hazelpaw close on his heels. "You're out

of the camp at last!" Mousepaw mewed.

"Isn't being an apprentice wonderful?" Hazelpaw added. "I still remember my first day. There was so much to take in."

I bet your first day as an apprentice was more exciting than this.

"We've just done a border patrol," Hazelpaw went on.

"And now we're going to do battle training in the mossy clearing!" Mousepaw finished.

"Great," Jaypaw muttered.

"You can come with us!" Mousepaw suggested suddenly.

He turned to his mentor, Spiderleg. "He can come, can't he?"

"Perhaps another day," Brightheart meowed. "We haven't finished exploring our territory," she explained, addressing Jaypaw as much as Mousepaw.

"Oh, okay," Mousepaw mewed, not sounding especially disappointed.

"Where are you heading now?" Dustpelt asked Brightheart.

"I'm going to show Jaypaw the old Thunderpath."

Spiderleg paused. "You'll be careful?" he cautioned. "Don't stray over the Shadowclan border."

Jaypaw bristled. They might have only one helpful eye between them, but they weren't idiots! As he prepared to snarl a reply, Brightheart mewed sharply, "I know a border marker when I smell it!"

Jaypaw sensed a flash of reproach shoot from Dustpelt. "Firestar trusted Brightheart with Jaypaw," he reminded Spiderleg quietly.

Spiderleg's paws rustled on the leafy forest floor. "Of course," he acknowledged. "Sorry, Brightheart."

This is why I asked for him to be made my apprentice, Brightheart's voice came through Jaypaw's mind, quietly enough that only he could hear. I won't let him give up.

Despite the bitterness and determination pulsating from those words, Brightheart met his apology with stony silence, and Jaypaw felt a prick of satisfaction that he wasn't the only one who felt patronized by the other warriors. This apprenticeship may not be what he hoped for, but he had to admit, Brightheart probably understood better than anyone else in the clan how much he desired to be a warrior, and how the clan's perceptions of you weren't always correct. Maybe there's one thing that's good about this.

Chapter 4

Lionpaw glanced up at the moon shining full and bright into the hollow. Clouds aren't going to stop this Gathering. Dustpelt, Spiderleg, and Ashfur were already waiting by the camp entrance. Firestar stood beneath Highledge with Sandstorm and Brambleclaw, talking quietly to them.

"What are we waiting for?" Jaypaw asked, digging his claws into the ground.

"It can't be much longer," Lionpaw mewed. He felt every bit as excited as his brother. This was their first Gathering, their first chance to meet apprentices from rival Clans, to swap stories and compare training—knowing that the next time they met might be in battle, with claws unsheathed and teeth bared.

"It looks like Firestar's waiting for Leafpool," Cinderpaw put in.

"Why's it taking her so long?" Jaypaw complained.

"You'd think she'd be quicker now with an apprentice helping ," Berrypaw pointed out.

"Maybe that's exactly why it's taking longer," Hazelpaw guessed. "Once you have an apprentice, every moment is an opportunity to learn, as Dustpelt says."

Cinderpaw's whiskers twitched. "Leafpool certainly seems to be following that philosophy. I've barely seen Hollypaw since she started her apprenticeship."

Come to think of it, even Lionpaw hadn't seen much of his sister, outside of meals sometimes. She was certainly working hard, and he wouldn't expect anything else from her. But before long, Leafpool padded out of the den to speak with Firestar, and he saw the black she-cat racing out behind. She paused a moment to flick her tail to Lionpaw in greeting, but soon continued on to join her mentor near

the front of the clan. Firestar padded to the head of the party and, with a sharp nod, bounded away through the tunnel. Lionpaw charged after his Clanmates, his heart soaring as their paws drummed the forest floor. He felt Jaypaw's pelt brushing his, rippling with excitement. A moment later they burst out of the tunnel and charged up the slope.

They raced past Sky Oak and down to the lake. The pebbles on the shore clattered beneath their paws. The stones grazed Lionpaw's pads but he didn't care; he could already see the island on the far side, rising from the water, crowded with trees. Their slender leafless branches reached up to the star-pricked sky, trembling like whiskers, and Lionpaw flicked his tail excitedly.

As the cats began the long trek through WindClan territory, Firestar steadied the pace. They passed the horseplace, where Daisy used to live, and crossed into RiverClan territory, always keeping within five tail-lengths of the waterline, as agreed by all the Clans. The ground became muddier as they neared the island. Lionpaw slowed down, He could make out dark shapes streaming over the fallen tree that bridged the gap between shore and island. The scent of ShadowClan mingled with RiverClan; the other Clans were arriving. But Windclan's scent still came from behind, as the patrol became visible racing towards the tree bridge behind Thunderclan.

"Will you mention the border markers?" Lionpaw heard his father meow. He peered past Mousepaw and Spiderleg and saw Brambleclaw keeping pace with Firestar.

"Do you mean the stronger marks Windclan has made on our border?" Firestar asked.

"Yes," Brambleclaw replied.

"I can't dictate what the other Clans do in their territory," Firestar reminded him.

"But they're clearly trying to get a rise out of us!" Brambleclaw growled.

"Exactly why we won't give them one," Firestar told him.

"Firestar's right." Ashfur hurried to catch up with them. "It would be better to send out more frequent border patrols than give the other Clans the satisfaction of knowing they've got us worried."

"It takes more than a strong scent to worry us!" Firestar declared.

"Waaa!" Lionpaw was only just able to turn around in time to see Jaypaw slip off the tree, falling into the lake below. Before he could contemplate running back off the tree and jumping into the depths to save his brother, a lanky black tom from the Windclan patrol reached forward and grabbed Jaypaw by the scruff, dragging him up and onto the shore. Jaypaw turned limp in his jaws, and Lionpaw felt a jolt of panic that his brother could really be dead, but once he was put back on solid ground the little gray tabby began heaving in air, though it was punctuated with gasps and coughs, letting water spill out from his mouth.

"Will he be okay?" The anxious mew of a young brown she-cat came from behind the black tom.

The older tom didn't answer, instead beginning to lick Jaypaw with a stern expression on his face completely absent from the young she-cat. You'd think he'd show at least a little fear or worry for the life he could be saving.

"He'll be fine, Heatherpaw." The Windclan warrior responded when Jaypaw's breathing steadied. But his attention quickly went back to Jaypaw. "Can you hear me?"

Jaypaw nodded, and even managed to push himself up to a sitting position, though as he shook his head more water sprayed out around them.

A younger black tom growled from behind the rescuer and Heatherpaw. "Typical that a ThunderClan cat should thank us by trying to drown us!"

The older tom growled a stern reply. "Stop making a fuss, Breezepaw! It's only a few drops of water."

"Thank you for the help!" Lionpaw called, finally managing to get

back across the tree bridge to help Jaypaw up. He felt his brother relax against his fur.

"No trouble, but a scrawny cat like him should have had more cats from his own clan watching him. I assume this is your first time crossing the tree bridge?" Jaypaw tensed against him, and he could hear a low growl coming out of his throat. This tom had better watch it if he didn't want a pawful from the two of them later.

"It is. And you're Windclan cats?" Lionpaw went on. These guys were even worse than Berrypaw!

The warrior nodded. "My name is Crowfeather. This is my apprentice Heatherpaw and back there is Breezepaw, my son."

"I'm Lionpaw, and that's my brother Jaypaw." He meowed, flicking his tail towards his still very damp companion.

Crowfeather looked behind Lionpaw, surveying something on the island side. "We'd better get going. Most of your clan is already across and the gathering will be starting soon."

With that, Crowfeather pushed past them and began walking across the bridge. Heatherpaw padded up to Lionpaw and Jaypaw, with steps so light Lionpaw could barely hear them at all. And her fur-

"Sorry about him." She meowed, her purple gaze resting on Jaypaw before it moved to him. "Crowfeather doesn't ever let go of that gruffness but I'm sure he really was happy to see you survived."

Breezepaw snorted. "It's not like he was even in that much danger. You could stand up in water that shallow! And he got himself into it, just walking off the tree bridge like that."

"I didn't walk off the edge!" Jaypaw hissed.

"It looked like it from where we were standing." Breezepaw sniffed.

"Breezepaw!" Heatherpaw scolded.

"It's not like it's his fault, he couldn't see the tree and it was slippery!" Lionpaw added in his retort, taking a step in front of his

brother for protection.

"Oh, was it just too dark for him?" Breezepaw teased, his eyes narrow. "The rest of us manage just fine!" Lionpaw could hear a growing growl in Jaypaw's throat, and Lionpaw couldn't blame him. Breezepaw was acting like a piece of fox-dung! Lionpaw briefly looked at his brother in pity, but quickly turned to look back at Breezepaw with a steel gaze.

Heatherpaw's gaze passed over Jaypaw and Lionpaw, with the golden tabby shivering as their eyes locked for a moment, and she tilted her head. "Wait, he really can't see it?"

"No, alright? I can't see. Run and tell all your friends!" Jaypaw couldn't possibly see the apprentices in front of him, but with how closely his eyes were trained on them, it looked to Lionpaw like he could.

Heatherpaw looked taken aback by the tabby apprentice's strong response, but she continued. "And they let you become an apprentice?"

Jaypaw looked as if he was about to explode with all the attention on him, so Lionpaw stepped in. "Yeah, why not? And we're going to be the best apprentices in the clan!"

"Come on!" All four apprentices jumped as Crowfeather's voice sounded from ahead of them, glancing at each other and seemingly deciding to hold off their conversation as they raced off across the tree.

Lionpaw broke into a run, bounding the last few tail-lengths to the fallen tree, and skidded to a halt by the withered roots. He stared up at the trunk that bridged the water between the shore and the island. The air was filled with the scents of ShadowClan, RiverClan, and now Windclan too. Suddenly he felt shy about facing all three Clans at once. "Do you think all the apprentices will be like Breezepaw?"

"Not all the Thunderclan apprentices are like Berrypaw, are they?" Jaypaw mewed scornfully.

"Well, no," Lionpaw murmured. "But you know how the warriors talk. What if the other clans train their apprentices to be nasty?"

"That's mouse-brained. No cat can change your personality through training. Some cats are just born pieces of mouse-dung."

Finally, he and Jaypaw were able to push through the last bushes and into the clearing. There were cats everywhere. Lionpaw had never seen so many different shades of pelts. Some were lithe, some broad- shouldered. Most seemed much bigger than him. There were more cats here than Lionpaw had imagined could live around the lake, and these were just a few from each Clan! At the far edge of the clearing, with the lake behind it sparkling distantly through the dark green-leaf forest, he saw the Great Oak, the center of every Gathering.

"Is it what you expected?" Jaypaw whispered.

"I didn't realize there would be so many cats." Lionpaw stared at a RiverClan tom, his pelt so sleek that it shone in the moonlight as he flexed his well-muscled shoulders. "There's a Riverclan warrior over there that looks really strong! Imagine meeting him in battle! I'm going to train twice as hard from now on."

"You're a new apprentice Lionpaw. You wouldn't be up against a warrior like that for moons." Jaypaw mewed crossly.

"But hey, what if you were?" Mousepaw's eyes twinkled as he stepped out with his siblings from the crowd..

Lionpaw gasped. "Is it really alright to talk to whoever we want?"

"Well," Mousepaw cautioned, "you'd be better off talking to the apprentices." He dipped his head toward a group of smaller RiverClan cats. "The warriors from the other Clans aren't dangerous or anything, but they won't be pleased to have some young apprentice pestering them."

"What if they talk to us?" Jaypaw grumbled.

"Just be polite and don't give too much information away," Hazelpaw warned. "Some of the warriors might use your

inexperience to find out what's happening in ThunderClan, which would give them an advantage they cannot have."

"Did you spill any secrets at your first Gathering, Mousepaw?" Lionpaw asked.

"Of course not!" Mousepaw sniffed.

"Yeah, right!" Berrypaw interjected sarcastically. "If I hadn't clamped my tail over your mouth you would have told Russetfur that Firestar was about to give up the land by the river before Firestar had a chance to announce it himself."

"But she's the ShadowClan deputy!" Mousepaw argued. "I couldn't just ignore her."

"You didn't have to tell her your Clan's whole history either," Berrypaw mewed, his whiskers twitching with mischief.

"Jaypaw! Lionpaw!" A call suddenly came from across the clearing and Lionpaw looked over to find Hollypaw hurtling over with a small, pale tabby she-cat.

"Hollypaw!" Lionpaw greeted her with excitement. "And Willowpaw too! You're friends now?"

"Since Willowpaw is the medicine cat apprentice from Riverclan, in a way we'll be training together! Of course we're friends!"

"Nice to see you both again! I'm sure you'll make great warriors. Oh, Hollypaw, I meant to ask earlier." Willowpaw's green eyes flashed in the moonlight as she faced his sister again. "Have you had your first dream from StarClan yet?"

"No, not yet."

"I bet you do soon," Willowpaw assured her. "Come on!" She swept her tail around Hollypaw. "I'll introduce you to the other medicine cats."

Willowpaw led Hollypaw toward where Leafpool was sharing tongues with a group of cats. Lionpaw felt a flash of envy. As a

medicine cat apprentice, his sister would have a special connection with all the Clans. She'd have an easier time than anyone making friends. He shuffled his paws nervously as he gazed at the strange faces around him. Then he remembered that the truce lasted for only one night. These cats were his enemies. Hollypaw could make friends, but that was useless for him. His duty was to get to know them so that he knew their strengths—and their weaknesses—when he met them in battle.

Lionpaw glanced around the clearing. He spotted a tightly clustered group of cats watching from the foot of the Great Oak. The shadows disguised the color of their pelts, and something about the way their eyes shone in the gloom made him shudder.

Are they ShadowClan?" he whispered to Mousepaw.

"Of course. Hasn't Ashfur taught you to smell yet?" Berrypaw cut in. "But you don't have to worry your little whiskers. Those guys like to look tough but they aren't any real match for a Thunderclan cat!"

"I wasn't scared!" Lionpaw growled, puffing up his chest. He was looking out for information about the other clans, just like he was supposed to! Berrypaw could be such a mange-pelt sometimes.

Hazelpaw glanced between the two, apparently deciding to not get involved. "I believe I will go catch up with Harepaw. It has been a while since we've seen each other," She mewed. "Jaypaw, would you consider joining me?"

Jaypaw nodded, though he didn't seem especially enthused by the idea.

"And I'm going to talk to Minnowpaw!" Mousepaw announced, seemingly missing the tension. He was staring at a young gray-and-white RiverClan she-cat whose pelt looked as downy as kit fur.

"Wait, her? She looks barely out of the nursery." Lionpaw remarked.

"She's a whole moon older than me," he corrected. "Come and talk to her," he went on. "You'll see she's not as soft as she looks."

Lionpaw followed Mousepaw over to where Minnowpaw sat with

two more RiverClan apprentices, one gray and one brown tabby. His nose twitched as he scented them. He knew the stench of ShadowClan and WindClan from their border markers, but RiverClan's fresh, fish-tinged scent smelled strange.

Minnowpaw nodded to them in welcome. Though she was slighter and softer in looks than her Clanmates, her amber eyes were sharp and intelligent. "Who's your friend?" she asked Mousepaw.

Mousepaw was staring at her with a wistful look in his eyes. "This is Lionpaw."

"Hello, Lionpaw," mewed Minnowpaw. "This is Pouncepaw"—she nodded toward the ginger-and-white tabby tom beside her—"and Pebblepaw." She flicked her tail toward the gray tom.

"What do you think of the island?" Pouncepaw asked.

"It's great," Lionpaw replied.

"We can show you around, if you like," Minnowpaw offered.

Mousepaw's eyes lit up. Clearly he liked the idea of a starlit stroll with the pretty apprentice. But Lionpaw would rather explore the place for himself, especially if Mousepaw was going to be round-eyed and moony over Minnowpaw the whole time.

"Thanks for the offer," he mewed. "But-uh..."

Suddenly a soft voice sounded in his ear. "Lionpaw, right?"

He swung around to find the light brown tabby she-cat from earlier gazing at him with eyes the color of a lavender, and as striking as the flower they resembled. He couldn't place a name for the color. It was sort of a...violet.

"Y-yep, that's me," he stammered. "Is Breezepaw around?"

"Oh, no he's probably showing off to some other apprentices." Heatherpaw took a moment to survey the clearing, looking for the black apprentice. "How is Jaypaw? Is he doing alright?"

Lionpaw forced himself to stop gaping like a startled rabbit. "Jaypaw?" he echoed. "Oh, he's fine now."

"Where is he?" Heatherpaw inquired.

Lionpaw was having trouble remembering where any of his littermates were right now.

"He went somewhere with Hazelpaw," Mousepaw answered for him, sounding impatient.

"I still can't believe he's walking on his own, even training to be a warrior despite being blind," Heatherpaw breathed. "He must be so brave!"

Lionpaw felt a twinge of envy. "Most of the time he's just quiet or grumpy," he told her. "Especially since he started his apprenticeship."

"How long have you been an apprentice?" Heatherpaw asked.

"Since quarter moon. What about you?"

"For a moon and a half now," she replied. "This is my second Gathering."

"Have you met Mousepaw before?" Lionpaw asked, sensing that his Clanmate was growing restless and casting longing glances back to the RiverClan apprentices.

"We've never spoken," Heatherpaw confessed. "But I saw him last time talking to Russetfur." She looked at Mousepaw. "Did Russetfur get any information out of you? She tried to from me, but fortunately Crowfeather had warned me not to give anything away."

Before Mousepaw could answer, Breezepaw trotted up to them. "We ought to join our Clan," he told Heatherpaw gruffly, pointedly ignoring the ThunderClan apprentices. "The meeting's about to begin."

"If you can believe it, Breezepaw is our newest apprentice. ," Heatherpaw told Mousepaw and Lionpaw, her whiskers twitching.

"Though you couldn't tell it from his manner. He's been trying to boss the other apprentices from the moment he went from a 'kit to a 'paw."

Breezepaw stared furiously at her, and the tip of his tail flicked from side to side.

"Don't worry, Breezepaw," Heatherpaw went on. "You'll be a warrior before you know it, and then you can boss all the apprentices around."

Breezepaw narrowed his eyes, clearly unsure whether she was being serious or not.

Heatherpaw glanced at Lionpaw, then whispered loud enough for Breezepaw to hear, "He thinks that I have to do what he says just because Crowfeather is my mentor and his father."

"You know Crowfeather would never—" Breezepaw started to object.

"Oh, come on, Breezepaw!" Heatherpaw pleaded. "Lighten up!" She gave his flank a nudge with her muzzle, then turned back to Lionpaw. "It's hard to believe, but Breezepaw can be great fun on a good day."

A commanding meow sounded from the Great Oak. "We meet beneath Silverpelt—"

"That's Onestar calling for the meeting to start!" Heatherpaw gasped.

Lionpaw swung around and saw the four Clan leaders sitting like owls in the lowest branch of the tree. Onestar, the lithe brown tabby who led WindClan, was speaking. ". . . commanded by the truce of the full moon."

Breezepaw flashed Heatherpaw a look that said, I told you so, and hurried away to join the rest of his Clan. Heatherpaw rolled her eyes at Lionpaw, then followed her Clanmate.

Feeling more confident now, Lionpaw joined the cats gathering

around the base of the oak. He wove among his Clanmates till he found a space between Jaypaw and Hollypaw.

Firestar sat beside Onestar on the branch. A sleek, spotted tabby she-cat sat next to him. Lionpaw guessed that was Leopardstar of RiverClan. Beyond her was a huge white tom with jet-black paws—ShadowClan's leader, Blackstar. "WindClan has one new apprentice this moon," Onestar announced. "Breezepaw." The black-pelted apprentice lifted his chin, apparently quite undaunted by having cats from all four Clans turning to stare at him. Lionpaw's heart began to race. He hoped he could look that when it was his turn to be named.

"This green-leaf has treated us well," Onestar went on. "The rabbits are running, but not too fast to catch, and the summer breezes have made hunting hard for the buzzards and hawks, which leaves more prey for us. Other than that," Onestar went on, "WindClan has nothing important to report."

Onestar turned to Blackstar, nodding for him to speak next.

"ShadowClan has one new apprentice too," Blackstar began. He looked down at a wiry brown she-cat sitting among the ShadowClan warriors. "Ivypaw."

Ivypaw nodded, her eyes narrowed. She didn't look pleased or proud to be announced as a new apprentice, as Breezepaw had. Do ShadowClan cats ever show their feelings? Lionpaw wondered. He felt Hollypaw fidgeting beside him. Her eyes were shining with excitement.

"Our turn next!" she breathed.

But Blackstar had not finished. "Hunting has been good for ShadowClan since we enlarged our territory."

Lionpaw stiffened as he heard a gasp from the ThunderClan warriors around him. Was Blackstar really going to make out that they had seized the land by the river fromThunderClan?

"Our new stretch of territory is a great source of prey," Blackstar

meowed.

"Liar!" Spiderleg muttered under his breath, "Firestar would never have given it up if it were!"

"ShadowClan would like to thank Firestar for his generosity in granting it to us," Blackstar finished with poisonous gratitude.

Firestar stared levelly at him. "I am pleased to hear that you are getting so much out of a piece of land prey-poor by ThunderClan standards," he meowed.

"Yes!" Hollypaw hissed. A subdued ripple of approval passed through the ThunderClan cats. Then Firestar turned his green gaze on the crowd.

"ThunderClan are fortunate to have more than one"—he lingered over the word—"new apprentice this moon." Lionpaw's ears twitched. Pride and anxiety churned in his belly. "Jaypaw." From behind them came a small purr. Jaypaw was licking his chest in an attempt to not meet eyes with any of the crowd, but he did seem happy. "Hollypaw." Hollypaw's green eyes shone like stars, her black pelt almost invisible in the gloom. Then Firestar's gaze flicked to Lionpaw. "And Lionpaw." Lionpaw could hardly hear anything for the blood rushing in his ears. He puffed his chest out and held up his chin, feeling his pelt burn under the stares from the other cats. In a moment that was at once too short and too long, it was over, and Firestar was carrying on with his report.

"We have been lucky this green-leaf," he meowed. "The prey has been running well despite the heat thanks to the shade our territory provides."

Lionpaw's pelt prickled. There was a new scent in the air,something he hadn't smelled before. Some of the other cats clearly scented it too—he could see their heads turning, searching the edge of the clearing. There was a rustle in the bracken close to where the WindClan cats were gathered and in the shadows Lionpaw saw movement. Firestar fell silent and watched with the other cats as two lithe shapes emerged from the undergrowth.

"Intruders!" The alert spread through the Clans like wildfire. All around Lionpaw felt pelts bristling in alarm and battle-hungry muscles tensing, ready to spring. The WindClan warriors who were nearest lunged at the strangers. Yowling and hissing, they wrestled the trespassers to the ground.

Lionpaw turned back to the Great Oak, wondering what the leaders would do. Firestar's fur was standing on end. His tail was stiff with shock, and his ears were pricked as he sniffed the air and sniffed again. "Stop!"

The WindClan cats froze and drew back, leaving the two strangers standing alone on the edge of the Clans. Lionpaw strained to see over the heads of the other cats. In a voice that was taut with shock and disbelief, Firestar called a name Lionpaw had only ever heard mentioned in nursery stories.

"Graystripe!"

Chapter 5

Hollypaw stared in amazement. Graystripe? "But he's dead!" she hissed to Lionpaw. Her brother did not reply. He was too busy trying to balance on his hind legs to get a better view.

Hollypaw ducked down and wove among the legs of the Clan cats until she reached the edge of the mass of cats. A gray tom with a stripe of darker fur along his spine stood in front of the bracken. His pelt clung to bone and wasted muscle, the fur matted and dull, and there were whiskers missing from his scratched and filthy muzzle. Beside him shivered a light gray tabby she-cat. Her short fur stuck out in clumps, and her tail hung limp and bedraggled.

"You're alive!" Firestar burst out from between Onestar and Tornear. He faced Graystripe round-eyed, his fur on end. Graystripe stared back. His companion flattened her ears and lifted her front paw defensively. She was trembling, her eyes bright with fear as she tried to look at all the cats at once.

"Easy now, Millie," Graystripe cautioned.

Firestar stretched his muzzle forward, sniffing tentatively, as though he could hardly believe what he saw. "The Twolegs didn't kill you. . . ." He lifted his face to the moon. "Thank StarClan," he whispered.

Startled mews erupted among the watching cats.

"Graystripe's come back!"

"He must have escaped from the Twolegs!"

"How did he survive?"

"What about Brackenfur?"

What about Brackenfur? Hollypaw looked up at the soft-spoken deputy. Firestar had held a vigil for Graystripe and made Brackenfur his deputy instead. But Graystripe was alive, and now

he had come back. . . .

The ThunderClan deputy was staring at Graystripe. "I can hardly believe that you found us." His voice was filled with shock, but a hint of worry glittered in his eyes as he stepped forward and brushed muzzles with the gray warrior.

Firestar flicked his tail. "Where did they take you?"

Graystripe didn't answer. He was staring at Firestar. "So you didn't wait for me."

Pain flashed in Firestar's eyes. "I couldn't."

Graystripe dipped his head. "You could not risk the Clan by keeping them in the forest."

Firestar leaned forward. "If it had been only my life at stake"—he glanced around the Clans, then lowered his voice—"I would have waited."

Hollypaw felt a rustling behind her. The other ThunderClan warriors were pushing their way forward to greet their old denmate.

"Graystripe!" Dustpelt dashed over. "You're alive!" Sandstorm, Dustpelt, Ashfur crowded excitedly around, sniffing his fur, poking him with their muzzles. Graystripe's eyes grew glassy as he saw his friends and even his son again.

"Firestar was right!" Stormfur mewed, pushing through the crowd as his voice cracked. "He told us you'd find your way back!"

Graystripe stared at Stormfur—his son—in astonishment. "Do you live with ThunderClan now?"

Hollypaw tried to go forward too, but her mentor blocked her path. "Give him some space for now," Leafpool warned. "He's exhausted."

"But he's a legend!" Mousepaw complained as Leafpool shooed him and the other apprentices away with her tail.

Squirrelflight was staring at Graystripe's companion. "Who are you?"

"This is Millie," Graystripe meowed. "I met her in Twolegplace."

Thornclaw gasped. "A kittypet made the journey with you?"

"I couldn't have managed it alone," Graystripe gazed longingly at the she-cat.

Firestar's expression became touched with confusion, though the happiness and relief was still most evident. "But how did you find us?"

"We searched for Graystripe's home first," Millie explained. Her voice had a hard edge that surprised Hollypaw. She thought all kittypets would speak with the same soft mew as Daisy.

Graystripe's ragged pelt bristled. "The whole forest was devastated when we got there. No cats, no prey, nothing but torn-up trees and monsters."

"How did you know which way we had gone?" Leafpool asked.

"We saw Ravenpaw. He told us to head toward the setting sun. We were lucky, and StarClan watched over us.."

Firestar's eyes glowed. "How is he?"

"He's well, but concerned for you all." Graystripe stopped for breath before going on. "He said he'd seen you pass and that you were heading toward the setting sun. So we carried on over Highstones —" He broke off, his tail quivering.

Leafpool darted forward. "Are you okay?"

"Just tired."

Leopardstar shouldered her way through the ThunderClan cats. A loud purr was rumbling in her throat. "It's good to see you again, Graystripe."

Cats from all four Clans surged around Graystripe until he was almost lost in a forest of pelts, brown, white, ginger, and tabby.

"Welcome back, Graystripe!"

"How did he find us?"

"StarClan must have been watching over him!"

Purrs blended, rumbling like thunder. Hollypaw watched in disbelief. She knew there was a truce at the Gathering, but this wasn't how it was supposed to be. There were meant to be four Clans, yet these warriors were acting like they belonged to the same one. She wriggled through the crush of pelts to where Lionpaw was watching with round eyes.

"It's not natural," she whispered in his ear. "Graystripe is ThunderClan. Why do so many cats from other clans care about him?"

"I don't know," Lionpaw admitted. "I thought that being a warrior meant protecting your Clan. Shouldn't the other Clans be worried that ThunderClan has an extra warrior now?"

Hazelpaw nosed in beside them. "They appear to be as close as Squirrelflight described the clans on the Great Journey."

"The Great Journey's over," Hollypaw pointed out. "And Graystripe wasn't even part of it." Though she supposed not everyone was pleased. Blackstar let out stifled hiss of disgust, staring at Millie with open malice. The gray she-cat glanced at him, then lifted her chin and returned his stare, and, even though her tail was trembling, she held the ShadowClan leader's gaze until he looked away. Hollypaw was impressed. Graystripe saw what was happening and bristled, the muscles flexing on his broad shoulders.

"Let's not forget the truce!" Leopardstar warned.

"The truce is for warriors," Blackstar snarled.

"The Gathering is for warriors!" Onestar called.

A murmur rippled through the WindClan cats and spread through ShadowClan.

"Is ThunderClan going to allow another kittypet to join its ranks?" muttered a disbelieving voice.

"I have trained Millie as a warrior!" Graystripe hissed. "A kittypet would never have survived such a long journey." His voice cracked into a cough, and Hollypaw saw that the gray warrior was trembling from his ears to the tip of his tail.

Firestar must have seen it too. He padded over to Graystripe and pressed against him. "Let us take you back to camp."

Graystripe glanced at Millie. "Do you think you can travel a little farther tonight?"

"I'll keep going as long as you need me to," she assured him.

"Very well," Firestar meowed. He looked at the other Clan leaders. "Was there any other news to be shared at the Gathering?"

"Not from RiverClan," Leopardstar answered.

"WindClan is satisfied," Onestar told him.

Blackstar shook his head.

"Then let us return," Firestar called to ThunderClan, "and show Graystripe and Millie their new home."

The clans began breaking up, and Thunderclan's warriors were quickly ushered in behind Firestar to bring their old warrior back home. But before they could leave, Hollypaw hurried back to stand beside her brothers. "Aren't you worried?" She asked them, irritated.

"About what?" Lionpaw asked.

"About Graystripe coming back, of course!" Hollypaw flicked her tail. "How can StarClan approve of Brackenfur being deputy when Graystripe is still alive?"

" StarClan didn't tell us he was still alive," Jaypaw reminded her. "If it meant so much to them, they should have sent a sign or something."

"Brackenfur makes a great deputy. Starclan can't ignore that." Lionpaw added.

"But what about the warrior code?" Hollypaw protested.

"What about it? Where's the rule about how to deal with deputies coming back from the dead to reclaim their positions?" Jaypaw demanded.

Hollypaw shook her head. No cat had mentioned the warrior code at the Gathering. And yet she could not shake the feeling that some rule had been broken by appointing a new deputy when the old one wasn't dead.

"Graystripe was deputy first," she argued, half to herself.

"Look if you think there's a problem, use your new medicine cat powers and just ask Starclan who should be deputy." Jaypaw suggested sarcastically.

"I-I just might," Hollypaw snapped.

Lionpaw shrugged. "The clan is doing fine. I don't see why we would need to change anything."

Around Hollypaw, the rest of the Clan murmured in hushed whispers as they returned , and Hollypaw guessed that they were as uncertain as she was about what would happen now that Graystripe had returned to ThunderClan.

"How was the Gathering?" Cinderpaw called.

Firestar halted, Graystripe beside him. "You should be asleep," he meowed to the apprentice. "You will be too tired for your training in the morning."

"Sorry, Firestar," Cinderpaw apologized. "But we couldn't sleep until we'd heard about the Gathering."

Graystripe's whiskers twitched with amusement. "We would have done the same when we were apprentices," he reminded Firestar.

"Who are you?" Poppypaw asked, coming out beside her sister. Her eyes grew round as she stared at the gray warrior.

"He was ThunderClan's deputy before you were born," Firestar told her.

"Graystripe?" Cinderpaw guessed, tipping her head to one side. Cinderpaw ran in an excited circle. "Can I tell Birchfall? Oh, please?" Without waiting for an answer, she charged toward the warriors' den, calling her mentor's name.

Cloudtail appeared at the den entrance, his sleep-ruffled pelt glowing in the moonlight. "What's the matter, Cinderpaw?" he complained.

"Graystripe is back!"

Cloudtail's eyes lit up with apprentice-like excitement. As he bounded over to greet his Clanmate, Sorreltail and Whitewing burst from the den, mewing excitedly.

"What's all this noise?" Mousefur's grumpy mew sounded as the old she-cat squeezed stiffly out through the tangled entrance of the elders' den.

Longtail appeared behind her, his blind eyes staring blankly ahead. He sniffed the air. Even in the dim light of the moon, Hollypaw saw the fur prick along his spine. "I smell Graystripe," he meowed.

"Graystripe?" Mousefur scoffed. "You're dreaming."

"He's not dreaming," Firestar promised.

Graystripe pushed his way out through the knot of warriors in the center of the clearing. "It really is me," he meowed.

"Great StarClan!" Mousefur raced over to Graystripe and ran her tail along his flank. "How in Silverpelt did you find us?"

Sandstorm stepped forward. "It's a long story that can wait till morning," she meowed softly. "Graystripe and Millie are exhausted."

"Millie?" Mousefur glanced at the stranger standing beside Graystripe.

"Millie helped me make the journey here," Graystripe explained. "She is my mate now."

Mousefur narrowed her eyes, and Hollypaw's belly tightened with anxiety. How would the crotchety elder react? Warriors weren't supposed to find mates outside their Clan, and certainly not kittypet mates.

But Mousefur only dipped her head to Millie. "Still breaking the rules, I see, Graystripe," she mewed.

Hollypaw flicked the tip of her tail uneasily. The Clan seemed ready to accept Millie, but what did StarClan think about it? She glanced at Firestar. Perhaps having a leader with kittypet roots meant it was okay. The most important thing was that Millie had proved herself a warrior by helping Graystripe find his way back to the Clan. They had both survived, and that must mean StarClan approved of her.

A shadow by the warriors' den caught her eye. Brook had woken up. The mountain cat padded over to Stormfur and murmured in his ear. Though Hollypaw quickly became aware of a growing murmuring among all the cats.

"Graystripe's not as big as I imagined," Cinderpaw whispered. "He looks small next to Brambleclaw. Even Brackenfur is almost his size."

"He smells of crow-food," Jaypaw mewed. "And that she-cat he brought back has an infection. Someone needs to get that fixed before she stinks up the whole camp."

"He must have been eating like a loner for moons," Lionpaw pointed out. "Once he starts eating like a warrior again, he won't seem so small."

Whitewing looked uneasily towards Brackenfur. The deputy had

quietly fallen to the back on the trip back to camp. "What will happen now? Who is our deputy?"

Squirrelflight's gaze flicked anxiously between the two warriors. "I don't know."

Hollypaw jumped to her paws. As a medicine cat apprentice she knew that she must take care of the new arrivals. Their bedding would need to be warm and comfortable, and they should have herbs to help them recover from their long journey. She and Leafpool gathered a little from each of the dens, and Hollypaw had helped her shape it into a comfortable nest for Graystripe and Millie. Graystripe might be ThunderClan's rightful deputy; Hollypaw wanted to make his nest as cozy as possible.

"Should I fetch them some herbs?" Hollypaw offered. "Jaypaw said that Millie's got an infected wound."

"How did he know?" Leafpool looked at her in surprise.

Hollypaw shrugged. "He smelled it, I guess." She was grasping for the name of some leaf or seed that might help, but after all the excitement of building the den, her mind felt too fuzzy.

"We'll make sure we see to it come sunhigh," Leafpool told her. "Right now, Graystripe and Millie need rest more than anything else." Leafpool gazed down at her. "You must be tired too," she observed.

"A little," Hollypaw admitted. In fact, she was almost numb with exhaustion.

"Let's get some sleep," Leafpool suggested. She got to her paws and padded toward the medicine den. Gratefully, Hollypaw followed her. She was looking forward to curling up in her nest and closing her eyes.

When Hollypaw awoke, weak sunlight was flowing through the brambles, rippling like water on the sandy earth. Immediately she thought of Graystripe, and felt a stab of disappointment that Starclan hadn't given her an answer last night. Firestar had told

them nothing would change right now. Did this mean that he planned to replace Brackenfur with his old friend eventually? Was it his choice?

She padded from the warm moss, scenting the chilly air. Her belly rumbled.

Leafpool lay in her nest, eyes closed. But as Hollypaw stirred, she lifted her nose. "Awake already?" She got to her paws and stretched, curling her tail till it shivered. "You had a busy night. I thought you'd sleep longer."

"I'm hungry," Hollypaw confessed.

"There's fresh-kill on the pile," Leafpool told her, scenting the air.

Hollypaw fetched a mouse for her mentor and a vole for herself. She ate ravenously, swallowing it in a few mouthfuls before licking her paws and washing her face. "Shall we check on Graystripe now?" she asked eagerly.

"Is it sunhigh?"

"Not yet."

"Then let them sleep a little longer," Leafpool decided.

She padded over to the piles of herbs at the back of the den and began sifting through them. "I need you to fetch some borage," she meowed. "We're running low, and Graystripe or Millie might have a fever. There's some lakeward, over the ridge."

Alarm pricked at Hollypaw's claws. "You won't wake them before I return?" She hadn't had a sick cat to treat since she became a medicine cat. She had tried to learn the names of herbs and what they were used for, but she was excited to actually use some. It might help her memorize them a little more easily.

"So long as you don't dawdle," Leafpool warned.

"I won't," Hollypaw promised.

Leafpool turned back to her herbs, spreading poppy seeds under her paw.

Hollypaw turned to leave, then paused. "The Clan sat vigil for Graystripe, didn't it?"

"Yes, we did." Leafpool didn't look up from sifting through a pile of feverfew.

"Does that mean he's officially dead? In the eyes of StarClan, I mean?"

"I think StarClan will have noticed that Graystripe's with us and not them," Leafpool meowed dryly.

"But what about the warrior code? Is he officially dead according to the warrior code?"

"Did he look like he was dead last night?" Leafpool meowed.

"But if he's not dead, then surely he's still dep—"

"We are here to heal." Leafpool looked directly at her. "Firestar's problems are not ours, unless StarClan wishes them to be. Now, are you going?"

"Going?" Hollypaw echoed.

"To fetch the borage." Leafpool sighed. "If you're not back before sun-high I will wake them without you."

"I'm going!" Hollypaw promised, spinning around and pushing her way out of the den.

Up on the ridge, a cold, fresh breeze was blowing through the trees from across the lake. Hollypaw thought she could detect the scent of RiverClan on it. Her paws itched to go exploring, but she wanted to get back before Graystripe and Millie woke up. She ducked her head and began to sniff the ground, hoping to find a scent trail that might lead her to borage. She desperately tried to remember what it smelled like in the medicine den, but her nose was too full of the scents of water and wind.

She padded down the steep slope, heading for where the trees thinned. The sun sparkled on the lake. What a great day for hunting! She pushed the thought away. I am hunting. Hunting for borage . Sniffing the ground once more, she picked up a tangy scent that seemed familiar. She followed it carefully and tracked the scent into some long grass, where she spotted green, jagged leaves growing in a clump. They carried the scent she had been following. It was stronger up close and more bitter. Was this borage? She had seen this before, she was sure.

She glanced up at the sun. It shone high above her. Leafpool would be waking Graystripe and Millie soon. Quickly she nipped a few stems, breaking them at the base, careful not to swallow any of the bitter sap. She pitied the cat who had to eat such a foul-tasting herb as she picked up the fallen stems in her jaws and hurried back to the camp. But many of the herbs smelled foul like this.

"This isn't borage." Leafpool stared in dismay at the stems Hollypaw had placed in front of her. "This is yarrow. This makes cats sick."

Hollypaw closed her eyes, ashamed and angry. Why couldn't she remember anything Leafpool taught her?

"Don't be hard on yourself," Leafpool encouraged. "There's a lot to learn."

Hollypaw couldn't meet her eyes. Don't make excuses for me. I should be doing better than this by now!

"Come on," Leafpool meowed briskly. "We can do without borage. Fetch some marigold leaves and we'll go and wake Graystripe."

Marigold leaves! Hollypaw knew what they looked like. They were easy to remember with those bright golden flowers. She bounded to the back of the cave and picked up a mouthful, then followed Leafpool across the clearing to Graystripe and Millie's makeshift den.

Firestar stood outside with Sandstorm and Honeypaw. Dustpelt, Cloudtail, Poppypaw, and Hazelpaw milled around eagerly. Graystripe and Millie, still ruffled from sleep, sat among them.

Millie was staring from face to face, her ears twitching. Even Graystripe looked uncomfortable, like he had forgotten what it was like to have so many cats around him.

"Have you been awake long?" Leafpool asked, weaving through the others to reach Graystripe. She glanced sternly at the cats clustered around the gray warrior and his mate. "I hope no cat woke you."

"No." Graystripe drew his paws closer in and tucked his tail tighter around him. "The sun woke us."

"You can catch up with everyone later." Leafpool twitched her tail, making it clear she wanted the other cats to leave.

"Let me know how they are when you've finished," Firestar requested before he led his Clanmates away.

Graystripe's shoulders loosened as they left. Millie looked relieved too.

"Any scratches?" Leafpool asked.

"Millie has a cut on one of her pads."

"Let's have a look."

Gingerly Millie held up her forepaw. "There's a thorn in there," Leafpool meowed. "Jaypaw was right; it's infected." She flicked her tail at Hollypaw. "My apprentice will pull it out while I prepare some leaves to heal the infection."

Hollypaw gulped and inhaled a fragment of marigold leaf from the bunch she still held in her jaws. She coughed, spitting the leaves out onto the ground, and glanced anxiously at Millie, who gazed equally anxiously back.

Hollypaw knew she couldn't refuse. This was what she had wanted, a chance to practice instead of simply learning. She peered closely at Millie's paw. Sure enough, a thorn was buried deep in the pad. To Hollypaw's dismay she could see blood and pus oozing around it.

"That must be sore," she breathed. Did she really have to pull it out

with her teeth?

Leafpool narrowed her eyes. "Perhaps I'd better do it."

Self-consciously, Hollypaw backed away and let Leafpool take her place. "Shall I chew the marigold leaves into a poultice?" she offered, her fur prickling with guilt.

"Yes." Leafpool was concentrating on Millie's paw with a detached intensity that Hollypaw wished she could copy. Why is all of this so difficult?

Graystripe began to wash his face. "It's so good to see the Clan again," he meowed between licks. "I always hoped I would find you, but I guess I never knew for sure. . . ."

"Were you angry at Firestar when you found he'd left without you?" Hollypaw meowed boldly.

Graystripe twitched the tip of his tail. "I was disappointed, but I can understand why he did it. No cat could have survived with the way the forest was."

"Ow!" Millie leaped backward and began to lick her paw.

Leafpool was holding the thorn between her teeth. She spat it out. "Press the marigold into the wound with your paw," she told Hollypaw.

Millie held out her sore paw, which was bleeding and swollen where the thorn had been stuck. Hollypaw shuddered and rubbed her paw in the marigold pulp. She began to smear the juice gingerly onto Millie's swollen pad. Millie stayed very still, even though it must have hurt.

"Cinderpelt would be proud of you both," Graystripe meowed.

I wish that were true , Hollypaw thought, forcing herself to hold back the bile rising in her throat. But if Cinderpelt is really watching me right now, she'll know that I can't do anything right for Leafpool. Hollypaw shook her head, putting a determined expression on her face. But somehow, I will get better! She told

herself firmly. One day her mind would be as sharp in the medicine den as it was in the mossy clearing. It was just a matter of time. She had chosen to become a medicine cat, and she was not about to let herself or her Clan down.

Chapter 6

"You're making me fight Lionpaw?" Berrypaw growled. "I won't prove anything with me winning that easily."

"You'll be lucky to win at all!" Lionpaw growled.

"Hold on, both of you." Brambleclaw voice cut through the feuding apprentices. "Berrypaw is several moons older than you, Lionpaw. For the purpose of making this a fair fight, Jaypaw will be fighting on your side." Jaypaw heard Brightheart cough beside him and he could almost hear what she meant. I would appreciate it if you checked with me before assigning my apprentice.

"We've got this." Lionpaw's murmur sounded confidently in his ear, but he couldn't be as sure. Jaypaw had fought Lionpaw before, although he'd never come close to winning, but neither of them had sparred with an older apprentice before.

"Remember what I told you Lionpaw." This time Ashfur's whisper came from beside Lionpaw.

"Alright...begin!"

As soon as Brambleclaw spoke he heard a heavy thud in front of him and felt a quick paw against his cheek. Hissing at the cat he realized was Berrypaw, he raised his right paw and crashed it down in front of him with as much force as he could muster, but his paw passed through the air.

Suddenly he felt another blow, to his side this time, and was nearly toppled to the side.

"You're nothing but a coward," Lionpaw growled to Berrypaw, and Jaypaw thankfully felt the weight lifted for a moment..

Berrypaw hissed. "I'm no coward, and I'll prove it!" Jaypaw felt Berrypaw's paw hit his head and made to reach out his paws to

catch the other apprentice.

"He's ducking," Lionpaw hissed to his brother.

Jaypaw instantly aimed his blows downward and pummelled. He gave a yowl of satisfaction as he felt the thin skin he had managed to catch.

"He's trying to get behind you now," Lionpaw warned. Taking the advice, Jaypaw turned nimbly around and lashed out his paws at Berrypaw. He felt the muscle tense and realized Berrypaw was trying to duck again. As soon as he lowered his head, Jaypaw leaped on top of him and rolled the older apprentice onto his back. He clung to his fur, digging in just enough to hold on.

"Hold him just like that!" Lionpaw's mewed grew louder and soon the sounds of his brother's own pummels came from just below Jaypaw's head.

"Okay! Stop! I give up!" Berrypaw whined, shaking his fur in an attempt to get Jaypaw off. When he felt the apprentice slow, he released his paws.

"That was great teamwork!" Brightheart congratulated.

"Yes, well done." Ashfur added.

"You two did great." Brambleclaw meowed briskly, before turning his attention to his apprentice. "What could you do to improve next time?"

Jaypaw couldn't be as happy. He couldn't have won without Lionpaw. He could tell just fine where things were when they were walking through the territory, but in the heat of battle he couldn't catch things in time to avoid or attack anything without someone whispering what was happening in his ear. He would never be a warrior. He had to accept that he couldn't fight alone. Fury raged inside him like a badger cornered in its set.

He barely noticed Brightheart's nudging as they finished and returned back to camp. What will I do when my assessments come? Forlornly, he picked up a mouse and began to nibble at his meal as

two warriors settled at the edge of the clearing.

"Nice catch, Dustpelt!" Graystripe called out from below Highledge, where he was sharing a rabbit with Millie.

"Thanks," Dustpelt meowed back.

Jaypaw liked Graystripe. He was easygoing and good- humored, though still guarded when there were lots of cats around. Millie was alright too, for a kittypet.

The thorn barrier rattled. The afternoon patrol had returned. Squirrelflight, Honeypaw, Whitewing, Spiderleg, and Mousepaw carried the scent of the forest temptingly into the clearing. And yet Jaypaw could tell a lot was on their minds.

Brackenfur swished out through the entrance of the warriors' den, followed by Sorreltail. "Anything to report?"

"Shadowclan marked nearly every tree on the border," Spiderleg replied, his mew sharp with anger.

Jaypaw felt an explosion of energy and heard Graystripe leaped to his paws. "What did they pin on us this time?" the warrior spat. "It doesn't matter. If any of them start treating their opinions as reason to invade, I'll claw their ears off."

"They haven't crossed the new border yet," Brackenfur informed him, seeming hesitant about speaking to his old mentor with such authority. "So we've decided to ignore them."

Graystripe snorted. "Ignore Shadowclan? You may as well try to ignore the wind and the rain—it won't stop you from getting cold and wet!"

"That may be how it was in the forest," Brackenfur meowed. "But it's not necessarily the best thing to do here."

"Things are different since the Great Journey," Squirrelflight added.

"Exactly, like how much more stuffy Onestar and Windclan have been ever since!" Ashfur growled. "Some cats will always care more

about their perception than how cats they should really care about feel."

Jaypaw felt his mother flinch, as though stung. What did Ashfur mean, exactly? Squirrelflight had nothing to do with Windclan.

Pebbles clattered from Highledge as Firestar leaped down into the clearing. "What's going on?" he asked.

"Graystripe feels that we shouldn't ignore Shadowclan," Brackenfur replied.

"I think Graystripe's right," Firestar meowed.

Jaypaw waited for the deputy to object, but Brackenfur remained silent.

"Graystripe may not have been in our new home for long," Firestar went on. "But he knows the histories of our clan and Shadowclan. I agree with him—Shadowclan will keep pressing on that border unless we make a stand."

"That's not what you said at the Gathering," Brackenfur meowed quietly.

"I didn't want to overreact before, but now I think we need to do something to show them we are ready to defend our borders."

Why didn't you tell me this before? Jaypaw felt the question burning in the quiet warrior's mind.

"Are we going to fight them?" Spiderleg asked.

"Not unless we have to," Firestar replied.

"But we must increase patrols along the border," Dustpelt put in.

Firestar nodded. "And we'll start matching Shadowclan's markers, tree for tree. If they think they can intimidate us into giving up more territory, they are wrong."

"Very well, Firestar," Brackenfur meowed, transitioning back into

the even tone of voice he used for sorting patrols. "Stormfur and Brook can mark the trees along the Shadowclan border while Sandstorm leads the hunting patrol as planned."

As the patrols assembled, Jaypaw gulped down the rest of his meal. Graystripe padded over to Brackenfur and sat down. Jaypaw leaned forward, straining his ears to hear their conversation.

"What's up with you?" Graystripe began. "Back in the forest, when you were my apprentice, you never would have disagreed with me in front of the clan like that."

Brackenfur took a deep breath, trying to calm his mind. "I grew up." He replied. "I needed to make my way without you. You weren't there so...I had to learn on my own."

The old warrior's mind darkened with worry. "This isn't about being deputy, is it?"

"No, of course not!" Brackenfur's voice had risen to a level Jaypaw had never heard until heard then. The deputy always seemed so calm. "You were supposed to be my mentor, but if it wasn't for Firestar being able to train me while Cinderpelt was injured, I might not have become a warrior at all!"

Graystripe seemed taken aback, and a long moment of silence passed between them. "I-I'm sorry." I didn't realize... What was Graystripe doing, if not training Brackenfur? Jaypaw focused, leaning in until he caught a glimpse of a silver tabby she-cat in his memory, and the scent of fish...did the old deputy like a Riverclan cat? Was that why Stormfur grew up in Riverclan?

"Deputies have to mentor an apprentice before they can be considered." Brackenfur continued. "And the only way you got that was by supposedly training me." He heard the fur of his head swoosh as he shook it. "It feels like you used me, just to be Firestar's deputy."

"Never!" Graystripe's response was immediate. "I didn't know who Firestar would choose. And I should have been a better mentor to you. I just-I just had a lot of other things on my mind at the time."

"I'm not going to stay mad at you, Graystripe. I have a clan to serve, and you are part of it. But maybe you should think about this if Firestar says you can be deputy again." The deputy stood up, padding off to his mate and leaving Graystripe alone.

Jaypaw got to his paws, meaning to make his way back to the apprentice's den and stay in for the rest of the night. He scented the air, but didn't detect Firestar around. He hadn't been there to hear Brackenfur's words. But as he passed the trailing brambles at the entrance to Leafpool's den, he heard Firestar's hushed mew outside. Jaypaw pricked his ears.

"I need you to share tongues with StarClan," Firestar meowed softly to the medicine cat.

"You are worried about Graystripe," Leafpool guessed.

"I have to know who ThunderClan's rightful deputy is," Firestar explained. "Vigil or no vigil, Graystripe was still alive when I appointed Brackenfur."

Leafpool paused. "Are you prepared for any answer they give?"

"Graystripe's my best friend. I owe him so much. But Brackenfur is a brave and loyal warrior." Firestar sighed. "Whatever StarClan says, a decision must be made."

"I'll visit the Moonpool," Leafpool promised. Jaypaw's whiskers twitched with curiosity. He had heard about the Moonpool. It had always sounded so mysterious—a place where only medicine cats visited to share tongues with StarClan. Would Hollypaw get to go with Leafpool tonight?

As Firestar headed away, Jaypaw recognized Hollypaw's quick step hurrying toward the medicine den. She halted beside Leafpool. "Are these the right leaves?"

Jaypaw smelled the familiar tang of borage.

"Yes," Leafpool purred. "Well done, Hollypaw."

"I knew I'd get it right in the end," Hollypaw mewed happily.

Jaypaw nosed his way out through the brambles, deciding he would make the excuse of coming to see Hollypaw.

"Well, hello Jaypaw," Leafpool greeted warmly. "Hollypaw," she mewed, to her apprentice, "you'll have to sort these leaves yourself. Make sure you store only the undamaged ones. Damaged leaves will rot before they dry."

"Won't you be here to help?" Hollypaw asked.

"I have to go to the Moonpool," Leafpool explained.

"What if a cat needs treatment?' Hollypaw mewed anxiously.

"You'll be fine. Brightheart knows a lot of the herbs and berries," Leafpool soothed. "Ask her if you need help."

"Could you show me which herb is which one more time?" Hollypaw pleaded.

"Okay," Leafpool agreed. "But then I must go."

The two cats disappeared inside the medicine den, leaving Jaypaw by himself. His mind was buzzing. He wasn't going to stay in his den bemoaning his future all night. If Leafpool was going to the Moonpool, he was going to follow her.

He hurried straight out of the den and past the entrance, slipping into the clump of brambles beside it. Jaypaw knew that the rock wall behind had crumbled enough to make it possible to climb to the top. It was steep, but Jaypaw hoped he could use it to get out of the camp without any cat noticing.

His heart pounding, he plunged through the brambles until he reached the cliff. Sniffing and feeling with his paws, he reached up and dug his claws into a bush rooted a tail-length up the stone. He hauled himself free of the bramble bush, then sniffed for the next hold. At last a fresh breeze ruffled his ears. He had reached the top of the hollow.

Digging his claws into the soft grass, he dragged himself over the edge of the cliff. Following the slope of the forest, he headed down

the steep bank that led to the camp entrance. On familiar ground now, he stopped a fox-length from the bottom and wriggled backward into the bracken.

A moment later Leafpool came pattering over the forest floor. Jaypaw let her pass, then scampered after her, keeping to one side so that he was never directly behind her. The scent of WindClan soon began to taint the air. Leafpool was heading toward the moorland. But she did not cross the border; instead turned towards the breeze and kept going until the land grew steeper.

Jaypaw heard a stream and followed Leafpool's scent trail as it turned off the soft grass and onto the jagged boulders that lined the tumbling water. There was less vegetation here to shield him. At least the sound of water disguised his stumbling steps.

The rocks beneath his paws rose and fell unevenly, and he had to slow down. Fortunately Leafpool's scent remained strong and steady. With a prickle of excitement, he realized that at the top of this stone hill must be the Moonpool.

Stones rattled in front of him, and Jaypaw stopped. He guessed that Leafpool was climbing the steep rocks that led up to the ridge. He waited until the noise had ceased and he was sure she had disappeared over the top. Then he followed, scrabbling from rock to rock, grazing his pads on the sharp granite.

Out of breath, he stopped at the top. He was at the brink of a hollow; Leafpool's scent drifted up, mingled with new smells of damp stone, dusty lichen, and water, fresh and sharp with the smell of the mountains. It trickled and splashed, echoing off encircling stone. As he padded cautiously forward, he realized there were other cats brushing against him, first one side, then the other, unbalancing him. Stop pushing! He shoved back, stumbling when he found only air around him. Voices whispered around the hollow.

"They have come."

"We must hurry. The moon is rising."

Who else is here? Jaypaw tasted the air, but he could scent only

Leafpool. Steadying his trembling tail, he listened to figure out where she was. The enclosing rocks amplified her breath as it rippled the water beneath her muzzle. He knew from its soft rhythm that she was sleeping.

Carefully, he followed the slope down toward the pool. The smooth stone beneath his paws was polished and dimpled, worn into a pathway over endless moons by countless paw steps. It led him on until water lapped at his paws. Then he lay down a fox-length away from where Leafpool slept and closed his eyes.

As soon as his nose touched the Moonpool, stars filled his vision. Far below he could see the starlit slopes of the hollow curving down to the glittering Moonpool. He stared, his breath quickening. The hollow was no longer empty but crowded with cats lining every ridge, with pelts bathed in moonlight. StarClan!

Jaypaw scanned the hollow, suddenly aware of cold stone beneath his paws. He was at the top of the ridge now, not the sky.

Leafpool stood and began to greet StarClan like old friends, padding around the slope and stopping to brush muzzles here and there. Jaypaw recognized none of them. They had lived before he was born. Only their Clan scents were familiar. He shrank back into the shadows, where no one could see him, and watched.

In front, a pale tom with warm eyes spoke. "It is good to see you again."

"You too, Lionheart," Leafpool replied. She turned next to a she-cat, broad- faced and round-eyed, with long, pale fur. "Bluestar." Leafpool dipped her head.

Bluestar's eyes sparkled. "You come with good news."

"Yes, Graystripe is back," Leafpool purred.

Murmurs of joy rippled around the cats.

"But there is a problem," Leafpool went on. "Firestar doesn't know who should be ThunderClan's deputy. Graystripe and Brackenfur were both appointed according to the warrior code."

"If Firestar is wise he will choose the warrior who knows the Clan best." Behind Leafpool a tom with a pelt as dark as the sky flicked his long, thin tail. Jaypaw tasted the air. He was WindClan.

"That will be a hard choice, Tallstar," Bluestar warned the WindClan cat. "One that no leader has ever had to make before."

Lionheart flicked his tail. "If only we had known that Graystripe was still alive. We could have let Leafpool know."

Bluestar nodded. "When we advised Firestar to pick a deputy, Brackenfur was the best warrior to help Firestar protect the Clan."

Leafpool looked up sharply. "Is he still the best?"

Bluestar and Lionheart exchanged glances but did not answer.

"Do you wish you had not sent the sign?" Leafpool pressed.

"Brackenfur has done well," Bluestar reassured her. "He was the right choice. Firestar would have been foolish to go on without a deputy when no cat knew if Graystripe would return."

"But who should be deputy now?"

"There is no true answer," Bluestar warned.

Leafpool blinked. "Then the decision is Firestar's to make?"

"Yes." She sighed. "But Tallstar is right when he says Firestar must choose the cat who knows the Clan best. He must use his head, not his heart, to reach his decision."

Leafpool dipped her head. "I will share this with him," she promised. She turned away from StarClan and padded back down to the Moonpool. Leafpool hesitated at the edge of the pool. "Cinderpelt?" she called hopefully, looking at the hollow. One cat stepped forward, but did not reply. Leafpool's breathing quickened, her eyes wistful, before she lay down, resting her muzzle beside the water once more and closing her eyes.

"Jaypaw!" Leafpool's shocked mew woke him from where he lay on

the cold stone. He scrambled to his paws. The pebbles scraped his pads and he stumbled. He was blind again.

Leafpool's anger flashed against his pelt. "What are you doing here?"

"I-I—"

"This is a place for medicine cats! I came here to share tongues with StarClan!"

"I know." Jaypaw gulped. "I saw you."

"You saw me with StarClan? How?"

"When I closed my eyes, that's what I dreamed. That's all."

Leafpool narrowed her eyes. "What did they say?"

"Bluestar said that Firestar must make his own decision," Jaypaw mewed. "But he should use his head, which I suppose means he should choose—"

"You understood!" Leafpool cut in. Her mew came in a shocked whisper.

Jaypaw was puzzled. Why wouldn't he understand? Was it because he wasn't a medicine cat? Or because he was blind?

"How did you find your way here?" Leafpool asked.

Jaypaw sensed wariness prick the medicine cat's pelt, as though she were afraid of his answer. "I followed you. . . ."

"You followed my scent, do you mean? All the way from the hollow?"

"Well yes, though I've heard stories about the Moonpool, so I knew how it looked."

Leafpool gasped.

"I can't help what I dream!" Jaypaw protested.

Leafpool turned away. "Something extraordinary has happened here." Her words were little more than a murmur, half spoken to herself, but they echoed off the water. "I just wish I knew what it meant."

"Why should it mean anything?" Jaypaw mewed. What was so odd about having a dream at the Moonpool? Wasn't that what it was there for?

"Come," Leafpool ordered. "We should return to camp." Briskness masked the confused mass of thoughts flooding her mind. She padded up the path to the top of the ridge, and Jaypaw followed. He let her guide him down the rocky slope beyond, though he had a clear enough sense of it now to manage by himself.

"Are you going to tell Firestar everything StarClan said?" he mewed.

"I'll tell him he must make his own choice about who is deputy."

"And that's all?"

"What do you mean?"

"I think Tallstar and Bluestar hinted that Firestar should choose Brackenfur. He's the one who knows the Clan best now." Jaypaw's nose twitched.

"Are you saying that I should influence Firestar's decision?"

"You'd only be interpreting what they really meant. Isn't that your duty?"

Jaypaw felt Leafpool's startled gaze like sunlight on his pelt. "Is that what you would do?"

"I would do what was best for the Clan."

Leafpool had stopped. Fear seemed to enfold her like a cloud. Had he done something wrong?

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," she replied, and padded on.

Jaypaw hurried after her.

"You know, that was pretty amazing what you did back there," she meowed. Her light tone didn't hide the anxiety sparking from her—or was it excitement? Why was she so on edge?

Jaypaw shrugged. "Aren't you supposed to see stuff like that at the Moonpool?"

"But this wasn't any old dream. You actually entered my dream. You saw what I saw."

"So?"

"I have entered another cat's dream only once, when Feathertail led me into Willowpaw's dream so that I could tell her where to find catmint," Leafpool explained. "But Feathertail was already with StarClan. She invited me in. You entered my dream on your own, without the permission or knowledge of StarClan."

"Are you sure they didn't know?"

"They would have told me," Leafpool meowed. Jaypaw heard Leafpool's paw steps halt. She was expectant, anxious; he could feel it like rain in the air. "What did you feel when you saw StarClan?" she asked. "Were you scared?"

"Scared of a bunch of dead cats?"

"They are your warrior ancestors," she reminded him. "They have seen and heard more than you could ever imagine."

"Of course they've seen more—I'm blind, remember?"

"You're not blind in your dreams, Jaypaw. Tell me, apart from the journey to the Moonpool, have you ever dreamed of anything else that has come true?"

Jaypaw shrugged. "Not really. Dreams are just dreams, aren't they?"

"Not to every cat."

"Sometimes I dream about when I was very small, traveling through snow," he confessed. "Is that right? That wasn't the Great Journey, was it?"

Tension crackled through Leafpool's fur. "No, the Great Journey was long before you were born. But your . . . your mother did make a long journey with you through the snow when you were very small. You were born outside the hollow, and she had to wait until you were all strong enough to travel."

Jaypaw could feel Leafpool staring at him, turning something over in her mind, like a fish too huge to be hooked out of the water. "What is it?" he asked.

"I think that you were destined to be a medicine cat," she meowed.

"Don't be silly," Jaypaw retorted. "I'm going to be a warrior." All his life he had imagined growing up to be a warrior. Why would he feel that way if StarClan had planned another destiny for him?

"But you entered my dream," Leafpool pointed out.

Jaypaw's tail shot up indignantly. "You think I want to be stuck in camp worrying over kits and elders more than I already am?"

Leafpool bristled. "There's more to being a medicine cat than that!"

"If there is," Jaypaw snapped, "let it be some other cat's destiny! I want to be able to fight for my Clan! Everyone treats me differently just because I'm blind!"

"I'm treating you differently because you can see StarClan in my dreams! I don't know of any medicine cat with visions as powerful as that."

But Jaypaw didn't want to listen anymore. He padded angrily ahead. "I don't care about having stupid dreams," he called over his shoulder. "I'm going to be a warrior. Besides, you've already got Hollypaw, remember? You can't have two medicine cat apprentices!"

Jaypaw willed himself to sleep, hoping for answers. "Spottedleaf?"

"Tell me why you wanted to share with Starclan," Spottedleaf prompted, before narrowing her eyes. "You came to find out where your true destiny lies, didn't you?"

Jaypaw blinked. "How did you know?"

Spottedleaf sighed. "Sorry," she mewed. "But I cannot tell you more than you are ready to know."

"I'm ready to know everything!" Jaypaw insisted. "Why does StarClan make it so hard to get answers?"

"Because they fear for you," Spottedleaf answered, her eyes darkening.

Jaypaw snorted. Even StarClan was treating him like a helpless kit!

"Do you trust me?"

"Yes," he murmured. He could sense something else inside her, many thoughts and memories pressed together into her motivations. Concentrating hard, he tracked the mass to its source and pried a single memory out... a flame-colored cat, green eyes clouded with grief . . . it was Firestar! This StarClan cat was in love with the ThunderClan leader! But how could that be? Spottedleaf had left the forest long ago, and Firestar had another mate. Jaypaw searched further. There was more, he knew, some knowledge obscured by shadows, something he could not name. . . .

"You have a remarkable gift," she mewed. Her eyes were wary, as though she'd felt him probing her mind. "You can see what no other cat sees. You can go where even StarClan cannot. You must use this power for the good of your Clan."

"But how?" Jaypaw asked.

"You must become a medicine cat," Spottedleaf meowed.

No! He didn't want to hear that. "I want to be a warrior!"

"But you have a gift!"

"Seeing in dreams? That's not a gift. The rest of the Clan see all the time!"

"But they don't see what you do. They can't go where you go."

"So I can visit StarClan! Big deal!"

"It is a big deal!" Spottedleaf hissed.

"But where does it get me?" Jaypaw argued. "The rest of my Clan think I'm useless."

"They don't know the power that you have."

"Power?" Jaypaw echoed.

Spottedleaf was trembling now. "Jaypaw, you have power enough to shape the destiny of your entire Clan."

Jaypaw stared at her. "But I want to be a warrior!"

"You must accept your destiny eventually."

"It's not fair!"

"I know." The medicine cat's voice suddenly grew soft. She brushed his muzzle with her tail, silencing him. "Your gift is not a burden," she whispered. "But it may be difficult anyway, at times like this. You must be brave, and make your choices carefully, because it has more power than the sharpest claw..."

Jaypaw tried to fight the sleepiness. There were still questions he wanted answered. "No," he complained weakly as his legs buckled beneath him.

Jaypaw opened his eyes. The world was black once more, and his body ached with cold. He was lying in his den, with no sound but the faint breathing of his denmates around him.

Please Jaypaw, make the right choice.

And in that instant, he realized that no matter how far he searched, he would eventually have to face the truth constantly fighting to stare him in the face. Leafpool was right... Jaypaw thought in disappointment. I have to be a medicine cat.

Chapter 7

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather below Highledge!"

"He must have decided who the deputy should be," Hollypaw mewed, hurrying over from the medicine den and sitting down beside her brothers. She wriggled down into the grass, shivering in anticipation.

"Graystripe and Brackenfur are on Highledge with Firestar," Hollypaw whispered to her brother.

"I know," Jaypaw answered curtly.

"I know you've all been wondering what will happen now that our previous deputy has returned," the Clan leader began.

"When we left the forest, I thought I would never see Graystripe again," Firestar confessed. "There were many nights when I stared up at Silverpelt and tried to imagine him among our ancestors." The ThunderClan leader went on. "Graystripe was my deputy and my friend. I trained with him and fought with him. I trusted him more than any cat. Having him back is like having one of my own lives restored."

"He's going to make Graystripe deputy again!" Hollypaw hissed under her breath.

"Wait," Jaypaw warned. How could he know anything?

"But Brackenfur has helped me lead the Clan through some of its most terrifying challenges. He is thoughtful, strong, and I've never seen him waver in his loyalty to his Clanmates. The last thing ThunderClan needs now is more change." He paused and glanced at the two warriors. "So I've decided that Brackenfur should remain deputy."

Mews of surprise rippled around the Clan. Hollypaw could understand. She looked up at Graystripe, but his expression was impossible to read.

Sorreltail raised her voice happily. "Brackenfur!"

"Brackenfur! Brackenfur!" Ashfur quickly joined in.

Dustpelt and Thornclaw started calling Brackenfur's name too. Graystripe got to his paws and joined in, and Brackenfur dipped his head respectfully to the former ThunderClan deputy.

"Told you so," Jaypaw murmured.

"How did you know?" Lionpaw asked accusingly.

Jaypaw shrugged. "It was the wisest choice."

"Do you think Graystripe minds?" Hollypaw whispered.

"Does it matter?" Jaypaw asked.

"He must know the Clan has changed a lot," Lionpaw replied.

"But what about when he's fully recovered?" Hollypaw persisted. "Will he be happy just being a warrior?"

"I think Firestar made the right decision." The meow made Lionpaw jump. He glanced up and saw Ashfur padding toward them.

"Brackenfur should be deputy," Lionpaw told him firmly. "Graystripe doesn't even know the territory yet. He'd be as lost as a WindClan kit in a ShadowClan nursery."

"Exactly." Ashfur nodded.

"And Graystripe is going to take another moon to recover," Jaypaw put in. "He still smells of crow-food."

"He'll be strong soon," Hollypaw mewed defensively.

"Soon isn't good enough," Lionpaw argued. "We need a strong deputy now. Green-leaf's heat is only getting stronger and Windclan

is making our lives more difficult. We can't afford to wait for Graystripe to recover."

"But he was deputy first!" Hollypaw protested. "Has everyone forgotten? When Mistyfoot was taken by Twolegs, Hawkfrost replaced her only until she returned. Because according to the warrior code she never stopped being the deputy!"

"Your sister has a point," Ashfur commented.

"I know, but" Lionpaw stammered. "Firestar has to be practical."

"If we start ignoring the warrior code, then we are no longer warriors!" Hollypaw declared. Anxious thoughts and Ferncloud's voice raced in her head.

"What if StarClan told Firestar to choose Brackenfur?" Jaypaw asked softly.

"But they didn't..." Hollypaw murmured. They would've told me.

"Hollypaw," Ashfur cut into their thoughts. "Shouldn't you be helping Leafpool?"

"Um, yes," Hollypaw mewed hastily, turning to get back to her duties in the medicine den. Her tail dragged behind her through the scorching dirt.

Hollypaw woke up long before dawn, not having slept much. Why couldn't she seem to memorize herbs or connect with Starclan like Leafpool did? Why did she always get distracted by clan politics when she was supposed to focus on her lessons? Why did healing seem to involve inflicting more suffering first? She stretched and crept out of her nest. She glanced at Leafpool, who was still asleep. Careful not to disturb her, Hollypaw slipped out of the den.

The clearing was empty. Even the forest was silent, and the dawn sky glowed pink behind the dark evergreen branches at the top of the hollow. She padded across the clearing and out through the thorn barrier. Maybe she could at least get some hunting done for Ferncloud and the kits.

Brook paced outside the entrance. She jerked her head around when she heard Hollypaw's paw steps.

"You're awake early."

"I couldn't sleep." Hollypaw yawned. "Has the dawn patrol left yet?"

"Not yet."

"I thought I could find some prey for Ferncloud," Hollypaw explained.

Brook gazed at her curiously. "That's kind, but won't Leafpool need you this morning?"

Hollypaw sighed.

"Such a troubled sigh for one so young," Brook meowed, her gray eyes softening with concern.

"Leafpool would probably get on better without me," Hollypaw muttered.

"Surely not," Brook meowed. "You've been working so hard."

"But I've made no progress," Hollypaw confessed. "Even when I try to help, it's awful. I have to see my clanmates suffer, whether it's a matter of making their cuts hurt worse or making them swallow those foul-tasting leave." She sat down miserably. "I thought that I could serve my Clanmates best as a medicine cat. That's why I asked to be Leafpool's apprentice. She's so important to the Clan."

"You want to be important?" Brook queried.

Hollypaw thought for a moment. It was more complicated than that. "Everyone respects Leafpool and listens to what she says."

"But is being listened to and respected the same as serving your Clan?"

Hollypaw glanced up at the mountain cat. Brook's eyes were round with sympathy. "I guess not," she mewed. "I just thought it would be

the best way to help the Clan."

"And now you think differently?"

"I don't think I can help the Clan at all as a medicine cat," Hollypaw mewed quietly. "I can't remember the names of the herbs. I get more excited about Firestar choosing Thunderclan's deputy than Leafpool choosing an herb to use. And I'd rather hunt for mice than borage or tansy." Frustration welled inside her. "It's all gone wrong! No cat will ever respect me now."

Brook ran her the tip of her tail down Hollypaw's back. "Cats win respect from their Clanmates by being loyal and brave, not holding important positions," she meowed. "Do you think Graystripe is less important than Brackenfur now that he's not the deputy?" Hollypaw shook her head. "It is hard for someone so young to make such big choices," the mountain cat went on. "When I was with the Tribe of Rushing Water, there were no such choices. All duties were divided into hunting or guarding. Prey-hunters like me were thin and lithe; guards were stocky and strong. The decision was made from birth which duty a cat would perform best."

Hollypaw was shocked. "You couldn't choose at all?"

"Not usually. But it was a good way to make sure each cat made the best use of the strengths they were born with."

"I wasn't born with a head for herbs." Hollypaw sighed reluctantly.

"Think of your strengths, not your weaknesses," Brook urged her. "As a Clan cat, you have the freedom to shape your own destiny, which Tribe cats never have. Use that freedom wisely."

"But how do I know I won't be awful at hunting or fighting too?" The only other time she'd tried to fight, all she had done was run away.

"You don't. You know you can try," Brook began. "But even if you never turn into the best hunter or fighter in the clan, that's not the only way to be special." Hollypaw looked up at her, sceptical. "For instance, I've never known anyone as dedicated to the warrior code

as you. Your passion could be a tremendous aid to your clanmates. What better way can you think of to serve your clan than that?"

Hollypaw's heart felt lighter than it had for days. No matter how her apprenticeship went, she could still act as a conscience to the clan: an arbiter of the warrior code.

"Don't forget, though, you will have to tell Leafpool."

Hollypaw sagged a little. "Of course." She looked down at her paws. "She'll think I'm letting her down."

"Leafpool is wise enough to see where your gifts lie," Brook meowed. "She will only think you courageous for speaking up now, rather than struggling on out of pride or stubbornness."

"Are you sure?"

"You will be doing what is best for your Clan. Leafpool will know that."

Hollypaw blinked gratefully at Brook. "Thank you," she whispered.

Brook dipped her head and turned back to watch the forest. Hollypaw ducked through the thorn barrier. She knew what she had to do. She would become a regular apprentice like Lionpaw and Jaypaw, and work hard to serve her Clan as a warrior. But first she had to tell Leafpool. Stiffening her shoulders, Hollypaw nosed her way into the medicine den.

But she suddenly felt as if there were a thorn stuck in her chest. She was turning away from something she had set her heart on because she was not good enough. Sadness welled inside her. Should she be giving up so easily?

"What's wrong, Hollypaw?" Leafpool looked up. "You look as though you've just lost our entire supply of poppy seeds!" Then her face grew serious. "You haven't, have you?"

Hollypaw shook her head. "No. But I have something very important to tell you." She forced herself to look her mentor in the eyes. "I can't be a medicine cat apprentice anymore," she mewed.

Leafpool blinked. "Why not?"

"I have to choose my destiny based on my strengths," Hollypaw meowed. "I'm just no good at being a medicine cat. You must know that."

"You are clever and hardworking. You can learn."

"But it doesn't feel right," Hollypaw tried to explain. She tipped her head to one side. "Can you understand?"

"You feel like a fish swimming upstream?" Leafpool suggested.

"Exactly." Hollypaw nodded, her heart aching. "If I change direction and swim with the current, I will swim so much faster."

"So you want to train as a warrior instead."

"I think it will be better for the Clan if I do."

Leafpool's eyes clouded with sorrow. "I feel as though I've let you down."

"No!" Hollypaw felt a stab of guilt. "You've been patient and kind. It's just not right for me."

"You would have been a good medicine cat." Leafpool flicked her tail. "But I see that you want to be the best at whatever you do."

"I have to be, for the sake of my Clan."

Leafpool stepped forward and brushed Hollypaw's cheek with her muzzle. "You will make a wonderful warrior, Hollypaw," she purred. "You have a warrior's spirit—I have seen you being noble and loyal and brave, and now I see you sacrificing your ambition for the good of the Clan." Her eyes shone. "I couldn't be more proud of you." Leafpool's words soothed the grief that pricked like a hedgehog at Hollypaw's heart. "I must tell you; I wasn't sure how I would say it, but there is another cat who I believe Starclan has indicated should be a medicine cat."

Hollypaw tilted her head in confusion. Really? Someone else

wanted to be a medicine cat? "Who is it?"

"I won't say until they agree." Leafpool replied, her gaze looking off somewhere unknown. "They did seem put off by the idea at first." She tabby she-cat shook her head, focusing back on Hollypaw. "But never mind that. Go find some of the other apprentices to catch up with. I'll need to tell Firestar about this."

Nodding, Hollypaw made her way out into the clearing, and saw Jaypaw stretching beside the apprentice den. It didn't seem like he had slept much longer than Hollypaw. "You look exhausted!" she mewed. "Did something keep you up?"

Jaypaw's eyes were bleary and his fur unkempt. "I'll explain later," he mewed. "I have to see Firestar."

"Firestar is busy talking to Leafpool." Hollypaw replied.

"I have to see her too."

What was he talking about? Had something happened? Alarm shot through Hollypaw's tail, making it twitch. Jaypaw tripped as he tried to climb the tumble of rocks up to Firestar's cave.

"Let me help," Hollypaw offered. "You're too tired to manage alone."

For once Jaypaw didn't object. Hollypaw's anxiety grew stronger, but she bit her tongue. He was obviously determined to speak to Firestar, and she wasn't going to waste time arguing. Instead she laid her tail over his shoulders and guided himup the rockfall.

At the ledge outside Firestar's den, Hollypaw announced her arrival.

"Ah, Hollypaw?" Firestar called her inside. "Leafpool told me you-" He looked surprised to see Jaypaw with her, but before he could voice it Jaypaw stumbled into the center of the den. He fixed his sightless gaze on Firestar, his stare so intense it seemed as though he could see the ThunderClan leader as clearly as the rest of them could.

"I need to train to be a medicine cat," he mewed.

Hollypaw stared at her brother in astonishment. Jaypaw had always been so sure that he wanted to be a warrior, ever since he had been old enough to pounce on a scrap of moss. She would never have guessed he was the potential apprentice Leafpool had been talking about.

Firestar looked at Hollypaw. "Did you know anything about this?"

"No!" Hollypaw gasped. Firestar sounded as if he suspected they had planned it together.

Jaypaw looked over his shoulder at her, his blue eyes round with anxiety. "Hollypaw, I'm sorry."

"It's all right." Leafpool padded over to Jaypaw and brushed his ear with her muzzle. "Hollypaw has already told me that she wants to train as a warrior apprentice instead."

Jaypaw blinked. "Really?"

Hollypaw nodded. A tingle of hope pricked her paws.

Perhaps this was the perfect solution! After all, Jaypaw had always known the herbs better than she did. But would Firestar agree?

Firestar looked at Leafpool. "Are you ready to take on another apprentice so soon?"

Leafpool sat down and wrapped her tail over her paws. "I would be honored to be Jaypaw's mentor." She dipped her head. "I think the Clan would be lucky to have him as its medicine cat."

"What about his blindness?" Firestar queried.

Hollypaw bristled. Surely Jaypaw wouldn't let Firestar get away with that? "He knows the herbs far better than me," she mewed quickly.

"His sense of smell is incredible," Leafpool agreed. "He can already tell an infected wound from a clean one a tail-length away."

Hollypaw waited for Jaypaw to point out that blindness had

nothing to do with it, but he only murmured, "I will try as hard as I can. Leafpool will soon see whether I can manage or not."

"Very well." Firestar nodded, looking a little dazed. "Leafpool will be your new mentor."

Jaypaw dipped his head.

"But first," Firestar went on, "we must tell Brightheart."

Jaypaw's ears twitched. "She'll be hurt." Hollypaw could hear anxiety in his mew. Her brother had never gotten on especially well with his mentor, but he was clearly worried about her feelings.

"Maybe Brightheart could be my mentor," she suggested.

Firestar shook his head. "Her skills were perfect for training Jaypaw, but not for you." He shifted his paws. "She will be a mentor again very soon; don't worry."

"What if she doesn't understand my decision?" Jaypaw mewed.

"It's up to you to make her understand," Firestar answered. "I may be able to tell the Clan what to do, but I can't tell them how to feel."

"I'll make sure that she knows my decision has nothing to do with her," Jaypaw promised. "This is something I have to do."

His mew was oddly flat. Hollypaw felt a ripple of unease stir her pelt. It was almost as if being Leafpool's apprentice wasn't Jaypaw's choice at all.

Leafpool glanced at Firestar and Sandstorm, the sort of meaningful glance that told Hollypaw that they wanted to exchange words in private.

Taking the hint, she bowed her head. "Shall I fetch Brightheart?"

Firestar nodded. "Yes, please."

"She's in the warriors' den," Jaypaw told them.

Hollypaw's whiskers twitched. It was weird that Jaypaw was always totally aware of what was going on in the camp. She bounded down into the clearing and padded over to the warriors' den. Sticking her head through the entrance, she called Brightheart's name.

Brightheart was sitting up in her nest, washing, her warm breath billowing in the gloom.

"Firestar would like to see you in his den," Hollypaw told her.

Brightheart stopped, her tongue still half out, and stared at Hollypaw. She looked as if she was about to ask why. Hollypaw ducked out of the den. She did not want to give Brightheart time to speak. She knew she would not be able to hide the truth, but she also knew that it was Jaypaw's duty to break his news to his mentor. She slipped into the apprentices' den before Brightheart emerged. It seemed a good time to visit her new home. The scent of the yew was strange, and the nests were all empty. Jaypaw's nest would be hers now, she guessed. She sniffed it out and gazed around the shelter, happy at the thought of sleeping among her Clanmates. After the nursery, her nest in the medicine den had seemed cold and lonely, even though she was happy to be rid of the potent smells. She wished some of the apprentices were here to welcome her. Everyone must be out training. The thought brought a prickle of excitement. Before long, she would be out with them.

Thundering paws came from the entrance to camp. Berrypaw was first into the clearing, with Hazelpaw and Mousepaw bundling just behind him, shining with the sun-high light reflecting off their pelts. They were followed by their mentors, Brambleclaw, Dustpelt, and Spiderleg.

"We did it!" Berrypaw's triumphant yowl echoed around the stone hollow. "We all passed our assessment, and now we'll be warriors!"

"Maybe we should assess how well you can keep your mouth shut," Dustpelt snapped.

"It's okay." Firestar sounded amused. "If the mentors will come and speak to me, we'll arrange the warrior ceremony."

All the apprentices were gathering in an excited cluster near their den. Lionpaw pelted across to join them, and Hollypaw hesitantly approached behind.

". . . and two voles," Berrypaw was meowing as Hollypaw came into earshot.

Honeypaw was looking on with shining eyes. "Wow, I hope I turn out to be as good a hunter as you, Berrypaw."

Lionpaw bristled. "You passed the assessment. It doesn't mean you've suddenly become deputy."

"I caught quite a large vole." Hazelpaw cut in, her glance between Lionpaw and her brother indicating she was trying to cut the tension. "I also managed to catch a blackbird just as it was about to take off. Dustpelt said he'd never seen such a good leap."

"That's great!" mewed Cinderpaw.

"I managed to catch a fish when I was on the way back!" Mousepaw boasted. Hollypaw's face contorted into an expression of disgust and she could see her denmates shared the thought. She knew Riverclan cats like Willowpaw ate fish but it sounded awful. Why would Mousepaw even try to catch a fish?

Firestar's voice rang out from the Highledge. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather for a Clan meeting!"

The clearing flooded with cats as the Clan began to emerge. Hollypaw caught sight of Mousefur and Longtail as they left the shelter of their den under the hazel bush. Leafpool came out of the medicine cats' den and sat in front of the screen of brambles. When all attention went to Daisy as she bounded over to the group of apprentices.

"Berrypaw, just look at you!" she exclaimed. "Your fur is sticking out all over the place. And Hazelpaw—have you collected every single burr between here and the lake?"

"It's okay, I can do it," Berrypaw protested.

"Nonsense," Daisy scolded. "You can't go to your warrior ceremony looking like some scruffy band of rogue kits. Any cat would think I hadn't brought you up properly." She began licking Berrypaw again, then broke off to add, "Mousepaw, you're just as bad! Have you seen the state of your tail?"

"I hope Firestar has forgotten about my tail," Berrypaw mewed anxiously. "He might use it to give me my warrior name." Berrypaw's tail was just a short stump. When he was a kit he had snuck out of the camp to go hunting and caught his tail in a foxtrap.

"What, Berrystumpytail?" Poppypaw suggested playfully. "That would be a mouthful!"

"Oh, no!" Berrypaw wailed. "Firestar wouldn't, would he?"

"Don't be silly," Daisy mewed.

"I'm sure you don't have to worry." Brightheart's voice joined the conversation. "When the dog pack attacked me, Bluestar gave me Lostface as my warrior name. But when Firestar became leader, he changed it. I'm sure he wouldn't give any cat a cruel name."

"I hope not!" Berrypaw still sounded worried.

"Be quiet, all of you," Graystripe interrupted. "The ceremony is about to start."

The excited murmuring of the Clan cats died into silence as Firestar began to speak. "No Clan can survive without new warriors. Brambleclaw, Dustpelt, Spiderleg, are your apprentices ready for their warrior ceremony?"

"Berrypaw has trained well," Brambleclaw replied.

"Hazelpaw will be a credit to her clan." Dustpelt meowed solemnly.

"Mousepaw is ready to be a warrior." Spiderleg added, a hint of amusement on his voice. Apparently the lighthearted tom had even managed to endear Spiderleg to him.

Firestar padded to the edge of the highrock, taking a moment of

silence before he began the ancient speech. "I, Firestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these three apprentices." The Clan leader's voice rang out above the rustle of trees at the top of the hollow. "They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn. Berrypaw, Hazelpaw, Mousepaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your lives?"

"I do!" Berrypaw called haughtily.

"I do." Hazelpaw replied, sounding as solemn as her mentor.

"I do!" Mousepaw added.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your warrior names," Firestar went on. "Berrypaw, from this moment you will be known as Berrynose."

"Oh, thank you!" the new warrior exclaimed, interrupting his Clan leader.

A ripple of amusement passed through the Clan, though Hollypaw caught a hiss of annoyance from Berrynose's former mentor, Brambleclaw.

Firestar waited for the noise to die down before continuing. "StarClan honors your bravery and your enthusiasm. Hazelpaw shall be known as Hazeltail. Starclan honors your patience and determination. And Mousepaw will be known as Mousewhisker. Starclan honors your energy and compassion. We welcome you all as full warriors of Thunderclan." The wise leader came down from the highrock, laying his muzzle on each new warrior's head in turn before they licked his shoulder. "ThunderClan is proud of you all," Firestar finished. "We will be safe under your guard tonight during your vigil."

"Mousewhisker! Hazeltail! Berrynose!" The Clan welcomed the three new warriors with enthusiastic yowls.

Firestar climbed the rock once more, waiting for the cheers to die

down before he continued. "There is one more thing we must do before I dismiss this meeting."

Murmurs of confusion replaced those of excitement and pride from a few moments before. What could this be about? All the other kits and apprentices were too young for ceremonies.

"Jaypaw has been called by Starclan to walk the path of a medicine cat. In his place, Hollypaw will be training as a warrior." The confusion now increased into shock as cats across the clearing gasped. Hollypaw was momentarily hurt that Firestar presented it as though she had been kicked out of the position, but this was probably the only way the clan would take it well.

"Jaypaw, Hollypaw, is it your wish to change the paths you take in this clan?"
Hollypaw looked at her brother, and for a moment it looked as if he was staring back. This wasn't a ceremony she had ever heard being done before, but it was clear what they should do.

"I do." They said in unison.

"Then Jaypaw, Leafpool will be your mentor from this moment onward. May she guide you in the strength and wisdom your position requires. And Hollypaw?" Firestar turned to face her, and as they locked eyes she wondered for the first time who her mentor would be. As a medicine cat it was guaranteed, but now it could be anyone in this clearing. She hoped they would get along. "Your mentor will be Thornclaw."

Chapter 8

Hollypaw flicked her tail happily at the choice, letting out the breath she had been holding as she waited for Firestar's choice. Thornclaw was a great fighter, but more than that he was dutiful and loyal, always standing up for the clan when it was threatened. Not to mention, he and Ashfur hung out a lot, so he might train her alongside Lionpaw even though they had trained for different amounts of time.

The cheers of her and Jaypaw's names grew from a hesitant silence and rang in her ears as she went to touch noses with her new mentor. Her ecstatic expression tempered slightly as she saw Thornclaw's steel gaze, but he didn't hesitate to complete the ceremony with her. Hollypaw could see Brightheart behind him, the hurt evident in her eyes. She hadn't been happy when she found out she wasn't to be Hollypaw's mentor but now she looked even worse. Maybe because they're siblings? Hollypaw knew she would be upset if Lionpaw became a mentor before her.

"Our apprentices have some work to do now," Firestar meowed. "I'll leave them in your paws. This meeting is dismissed" He turned and padded back into his den off the highrock.

Thornclaw looked Hollypaw up and down, using his eyes rather than moving his head. "You've got some catching up to do," he warned after a few moments of silence.

"I know, and I'm going to train extra hard."

"I would expect nothing less." Thornclaw flicked his tail. "If you're going to be a warrior, I want you to concentrate on the present. You've made your decision, and I expect you to stick to it. You will have to train yourself and your mind to look at the world differently."

"I will!" Hollypaw vowed.

This time Thornclaw only nodded as a response. "Starting tomorrow, I will expect you to join me on dawn patrol each day, after which we will do battle training and hunting in the evening."

She felt a wave of relief. This was what she wanted to do anyway. Thornclaw would help her become the model of a warrior. Maybe one day, with training like this, she could even become leader!

"I won't wait until tomorrow to begin your training, however. I am going to give you a tour of the territory today and in the evening we will begin training you to hunt."

"I've already seen the territory." Hollypaw meowed hesitantly.

"But before you were shown it as a medicine cat. Today we will be focusing on borders, scents, and the best places for prey." With that Thornclaw headed back towards the thorn barrier and raced out of the entrance. Taken by surprise, Hollypaw pelted after him, her tail fluffed out.

My first outing as a warrior apprentice! Thornclaw didn't slow down to accommodate her shorter legs or look back to see her heaving breaths as she raced twice as fast to keep up with him. All the time Hollypaw had spent sorting herbs had exercised her mind more than her body. She realized with a jolt how much fitter the other warrior apprentices must be.

Thornclaw kept his gazed fixed on the path ahead as she struggled after him. "We're nearly there," he stated, barely seeming to have lost any breath from the run. Hollypaw dug her claws into the frozen earth and tried even harder to catch up. A fallen tree blocked the path, but Thornclaw cleared it with ease. Hollypaw skidded to a halt in front of it and wriggled through the narrow gap underneath.

Thornclaw was waiting for her on the other side as the trees opened up into a wide grassy plain. Windclan. The breeze coming over from the other side of the river was cooler than she expected. Green-leaf must be just about over. Her mentor's eyes scanned the horizon for any sign of movement across the river. Hollypaw knew he had been particularly vigilant in keeping an eye on the Windclan scent marks since the tensions had begun.

"As you may know by now, the river here separates our territory from Windclan, which is especially important to know right now." Thornclaw began, flicking his tail towards the quickly rushing water. "As you are a warrior apprentice now, it is possible you could find yourself in a battle with them, and even if you don't you must know how to treat them."

Hollypaw nodded attentively. Barkface and Kestrelflight seemed nice enough when she met them at the half-moon gathering but she couldn't be soft on Windclan cats just because they were clanmates of cats she knew. That was the first rule of the warrior code after all.

"This river also leads up to the moonpool, although as a warrior you won't be expected to go there at all." Thornclaw must have known that she knew this was the route to the moonpool. Leafpool showed her the way. But it was strange to think that she might never see that place again. She heard Dustpelt say that back in the old territories apprentices would all journey to their version of the moonpool before they received their name, but the tradition had died out when they reached the lake. Now a warrior could go their whole life without going there. Unless they become leader.

"Take in this scent for a moment. What can you pick up that would be useful to a warrior?"

Hollypaw tasted the air, closing her eyes to concentrate. She could smell some bitter herb nearby, and a faint sweet scent that suggested there might be honey. That was good, Leafpool didn't get honey that often and it would be good for sore throats.

The black she-cat shook her head to clear it. That wasn't important anymore. Reaching out her senses again, she picked up some scents on the breeze coming from the other size of the river. It was fainter than Thunderclan scent, probably due to the constant wind on the moor, but there was a distinct smell of cats mixed with rabbits and heather. "I smell the Windclan cats who left their scent at the border."

Thornclaw huffed. "It would be hard not to. They've been marking it very strongly in recent moons." Hollypaw could see the golden

brown warrior dig his claws into the ground as he glared across the grassy open territory across from them. It really was incredible Thornclaw could get so fired up by border tensions. He was so loyal. His feelings were bound up in the clan's wellbeing. "But it doesn't look like any of them are here right now. Let's move on. There's more to see."

After traversing the rest of the territory, Hollypaw felt like her paws were about to fall off. Did Thornclaw always give such little warning before he shot off? Her muscles were screaming for her to sit down, but there was no way she was going to show she was struggling to keep up.

Thornclaw looked up at the sky where the sun was beginning to dip towards the horizon. "Time for your hunting lessons." He meowed simply before he took off again. At least this time she knew where she was going: the mossy clearing a little ways from the abandoned twoleg nest. There were lots of herbs that grew in the area, but she would be going for warrior training this time.

Cloudtail was speaking to Birchfall at the edge of the clearing while Squirrelflight had her gaze fixed intently on Cinderpaw, Honeypaw, and Poppypaw as they competed to see who could skid farthest through the grass.

Poppypaw was the first to notice them, and she stared at Hollypaw in surprise. "What are you doing here?"

"Hollypaw is ready to learn the basics of hunting," Thornclaw meowed.

Cinderpaw's tail flicked. "That's great!" A purr escaped her throat. The gray she-cat had a way of brightening every cat's spirits when they were denmates back in the nursery, and clearly her apprenticeship hadn't dampened any of her energy.

"Can we help?" Poppypaw asked, turning her head between Cloudtail and Thornclaw. "It might be easier if she had someone her size she could imitate."

A look passed between the four older warriors before Thornclaw

nodded. "That sounds fine."

"And you three could use some practice too." Birchfall put in. "Some of your crouches have been sloppy." Honeypaw licked her chest fur in embarrassment and Poppypaw looked put off by the comment but Cinderpaw's bright expression remained.

"Alright Hollypaw," Squirrelflight meowed. "Try out a hunting crouch." her mother smiled encouragingly as Hollypaw sunk into a crouch, feeling her shoulders brush her ears as she flattened herself as much as she could.

Thornclaw moved to stand beside the older warriors so he could get a full view of her stance. "Keep your tail still." He ordered.

Hollypaw realized that the tip of her tail was twitching with excitement. "Sorry," she breathed. When she held it still, the whooshing of the grass beneath it silenced. Honeypaw's soft golden pelt came into view and the older apprentice crouched in front of her.

"Like this." She meowed, bouncing within her crouch. "You want to keep your body loose enough so you'll be able to stalk your prey easily."

At the she-cat's advice, Hollypaw let out a breath, trying to relax her muscles into a more stretched out position.

"That looks great Hollypaw!" Cloudtail called.

Hollypaw felt her chest swell with pride at the fluffy tom's praise. But after standing in the position for a few moments, she looked around to the other cats. "What do I do now?"

"Stalk of course." Thornclaw cut in. "Try moving forward and pouncing when you're ready."

The black she cat nodded, concentrating on her right leg first as she stretched it out as far as she could. She had seen the apprentices doing this outside their den before. It looked really smooth.

"No." Thornclaw's voice interrupted her thoughts. "The goal is to

keep yourself flat. You don't need to focus on your body since it should stay about the same until you pounce. Focus on where you're going."

Squirrelflight stepped in, brushing her fluffy tail against the golden warrior. "Maybe it would help if she had something specific she could aim for."

Thornclaw's gaze softened as he looked at her mother. After a moment of silence, he replied. "That's true. I was going to wait but..." After looking around for a moment, Thornclaw pointed with his tail to a small stick that appeared to have just fallen from the tree. "There. Imagine that stick is your prey."

Now with a focal point, Hollypaw locked her gaze on the stick and found her movements came much easier than she would have expected. As she closed in on it, she wriggled her haunches as she leaned into her back legs and sprang forward, feeling a burst of pride as she landed and felt the crack of the stick beneath her.

"Yay!" Cinderpaw called. "You did it Hollypaw!" She black she cat looked up at her mentor and he nodded in conformation.

"I think it's time to try out some real prey." Thornclaw meowed.

The patrol padded forward through the brush, lining up on the edge of a small clearing. Hollypaw slid into the space between Honeypaw and her mentor.

"Keep your tail still," he whispered.

The rest of the patrol lined up along the edge of the bracken, their eyes all fixed on the leaf-strewn earth around the tree.

"I see something!" Poppypaw hissed quietly.

Hollypaw searched the forest floor, but could see nothing. She looked at the splashed she-cat and followed her gaze. She was staring at a single leaf trembling beside an exposed root. Was that really prey? She sniffed the air. At first all she smelled was the pungent mustiness of dead leaves. And then she smelled mouse. She thrashed her tail, setting the bracken rattling again.

The leaf up ahead flipped over, and Poppypaw shot out of the bracken and hurled herself toward it.

"Mouse-dung" she cursed as she slammed her paws down on empty ground.

"You scared it off!" Thornclaw glared at Hollypaw. "I told you to keep your tail still. Mice tend to hear better than sticks."

Hollypaw's ears grew hot. "I'm sorry," she apologized.

"Don't be hard on her," Cloudtail meowed, coming to stand beside Thornclaw. "It's her first hunt."

Poppypaw nodded, regaining a small smile. "It's okay, Hollypaw. I was just annoyed because I wasn't fast enough."

"You looked fast enough to me!" Hollypaw told her.

"She did well but it doesn't change the fact that we don't have any prey to bring back," Honeypaw mewed hesitantly.

"Keep quiet, or nothing is going to stir from its burrow for the rest of the day," Birchfall ordered.

Poppypaw hurried back to the bracken, and the patrol took up their positions once more.

Hollypaw's back was beginning to ache from crouching in the same position so long. Poppypaw had caught a mouse at last, Cinderpaw had caught a vole, and Honeypaw had spotted a sparrow flitting from tree to tree and disappeared into the undergrowth to track it.

"Your turn," Thornclaw meowed in Hollypaw's ear.

Her shoulders stiffened. "Are you sure?" She thought she was more likely to scare the prey away than catch anything.

"You learn more by trying than by watching," Thornclaw replied.

Hollypaw focused on the beech tree up ahead. The clearing still smelled of blood. Surely no more prey would be foolish enough to

stray out after the prey kills here?

"Shouldn't we try somewhere else?" she suggested.

"There are beechnuts here," Thornclaw reminded her, his voice growing firmer with the continued questions. "If a creature's hungry enough, it'll risk anything for food."

Hollypaw stared among the roots of the tree. Almost at once she noticed a leaf flickering on the ground. She dashed out of the bracken and threw herself on top of it. Her heart sank when she realized that the ground felt flat and lifeless beneath her paws. She had caught nothing more than a dead leaf, flapping in the breeze.

She glanced back at her Clanmates, her pelt prickling with embarrassment. Cloudtail's whiskers were twitching.

Squirrelflight glanced sharply at the white warrior and his whiskers stopped moving. "It's the same for every cat to start with," her mother reassured. "Have another try."

Hollypaw closed her eyes and took a deep breath. Then she blinked them open and glanced around the clearing. I'm not fast enough yet to hunt from the bracken , she decided. She studied the tree. Its pale bark darkened at the roots, which snaked out from the base before disappearing into the earth. Her black pelt would blend in well. Climbing stealthily onto the largest root, she crouched and began to wait. She looked over at Thornclaw, wondering if she had done the right thing. He nodded.

Relieved, Hollypaw turned her attention back to the forest floor. She kept perfectly still, not letting even an itch make her ear twitch. Far away, a sparrow screeched an alarm before falling silent. Still she did not move.

Then, almost directly below the root where she crouched, a tiny movement in the leaves made her tense the muscles in her hind legs. She waited. Sure enough, the leaf stirred again, and a small pink nose came snuffling to the surface. A mouse! Hollypaw held her breath, waiting to strike. The mouse nosed its way farther out into the open, heading for a beechnut. Hollypaw knew it had no

idea she was there. She pounced, catching the mouse squarely between her forepaws.

"Well done!" Squirrelflight called happily.

Hollypaw looked up, the warm mouse dangling in her jaws. Her first kill! She closed her eyes, remembering how Poppypaw and Birchfall had given thanks to StarClan when they had made their kills.

"Thank you for the life of this prey, given to feed my Clan. I shall take no more than I want..." She paused. "I mean, need, and I shall give all that I can." She was on her way to being a warrior at last!

"That was quite a nice patrol," Hazeltail meowed, dipping her head to the apprentice as she came up beside her.

"It was!" She was happy to have Hazeltail for the dawn patrol. The she-cat was fun to talk to and took her duties seriously. "I'm happy I got to stretch my legs. They were really stiff when I woke up this morning."

"Can we come out with you next time?" Foxkit begged.

Icekit swiped her brother playfully around the ears. "We're only kits," she mewed. "They'll never let us go with them."

"But watch this move!" Foxkit crouched down, sticking his tail in the air and wiggling his haunches. He lunged forward and landed on a leaf, pinning it to the ground. "I could beat up any cat that dares cross our border!"

Icekit's short whiskers quivered with amusement. "Next time the leaves launch an attack on camp, I'm sure Brackenfur will ask you to help!"

"You'll make great warriors one day" Hazeltail told them, showing a rare smile. "But Icekit is right. This isn't a job for kits."

Just then Cinderpaw emerged from the den, yawning as she made her way to the near empty fresh-kill pile.

"Anything there?" Hollypaw called to the gray apprentice.

"Only a mouse." Cinderpaw pawed it uncertainly. "A bit stale, but not too bad."

Hollypaw padded toward her. "Perhaps we should see if Daisy wants it for the kits first. I'm sure the morning hunting patrol will be back soon too"

"No, thank you!" Daisy rushed out of the nursery, ushering the kits back in. "They should still be in bed. They can wait for the other patrol and have something warm and fresh."

"I don't mind eating a stale mouse!" Foxkit offered.

"No," Daisy mewed, "I won't have you getting a stomach ache. Only warm food for you."

"But I'm hungry!"

"Greedy, more like!" Icekit teased. The fluffy white kit cuffed her brother around his ear. He turned on her at once and pounced. She squealed and pummeled him with her hind legs.

Daisy moved her tail out of the way as they rolled past her. "It'll be a relief when they move into the apprentices' den," she mewed. Hollypaw knew that she didn't mean it. Ferncloud would probably move back to the warriors' den, and Daisy would be alone in the empty nursery.

Firestar's call sounded from outside the den. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather here beneath the Highledge."

"A Clan meeting?" Thornclaw narrowed his eyes. "I suppose training will have to wait."

"I hope everything is alright." Brook meowed, slowly moving to the front of the clearing. Hollypaw glanced at Hazeltail, excitement fluttering in her chest. Had something happened? She darted ahead of the others and saw Firestar leaping down the tumble of rocks from the Highledge.

Cinderpaw came to sit beside her. "The patrol's back," She whispered to Hollypaw as she settled down. "Perhaps they've brought news."

Stormfur and Brook settled at the edge of the clearing. Graystripe and Millie padded out from behind the warriors' den. Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight sat down in the shadow of Highledge while Lionpaw padded after Ashfur and settled beside his mentor. Daisy stayed by the nursery, whisking Icekit and Foxkit back with her tail as they tried to see what was happening.

Once the Clan had settled, Firestar sat down in the center of the clearing. He gazed around, his eyes shining.

"Doesn't look like anything bad," Hollypaw murmured to Cinderpaw.

"There is something I've wanted to do for a while," Firestar began. "And now that newleaf is here it seems like a good time for new beginnings."

Hollypaw leaned forward excitedly.

"It is time Millie became a ThunderClan warrior!"

Hollypaw froze. Millie had been a kittypet when Graystripe had met her. He'd given her some warrior training and she'd helped him on the long journey back to his Clan. But did that make her a warrior? Hollypaw didn't even know if Millie believed in StarClan. Mews of approval rippled around the edge of the clearing.

"About time!" Whitewing called.

Birchfall kneaded the ground. "She has the heart of warrior!"

Hollypaw stared at them in surprise. Surely it wasn't that simple? Making a kittypet a warrior? Wouldn't that create even more clan hostility than there already was? Millie was a good hunter and had proved her loyalty to the clan but to make her a ThunderClan warrior...

"Millie." Firestar beckoned the striped gray tabby.

She stepped forward, chin high. Hollypaw couldn't help admiring her. And yet she had never trained as an apprentice. How could she possibly have a warrior name? Hollypaw felt her chest tighten with anxiety.

"You led Graystripe back to us," Firestar meowed. "And have helped us ever since. No cat doubts your loyalty or your skill. You have earned the warrior name I give you." He paused for a moment. "From this day on you shall be known as—"

"Wait!" Mews of surprise rippled among the Clan as Millie interrupted Firestar.

She gazed steadily around the cats, her blue eyes glowing. "I'm privileged to be considered a ThunderClan warrior," she meowed. "I could ask for no greater honor. And I am grateful to Graystripe for rescuing me from my life as a kittypet." She blinked warmly at her mate. "If I'd stayed my whole life as a Twoleg companion, it would have been only half a life. But—"

Graystripe stepped forward. "Millie?" His eyes were clouded with anxiety. "You're not going to leave, are you?"

"Never." Millie padded toward him and brushed her muzzle against his. Then she turned back to Firestar. "You can rely on my loyalty until the day I join StarClan, and you must believe that I will live and die to protect ThunderClan. But I don't want to change my name. I have always been Millie, and I see no shame in it."

A shocked silence gripped the Clan. Ashfur flicked his tail. Sandstorm narrowed her eyes, studying the former kittypet. Brambleclaw's whiskers twitched.

Graystripe lifted his chin. "Millie is right. It doesn't matter what she's called. It only matters how she acts, and I know that she will always put the Clan first."

Hollypaw watched Firestar, wondering what he would do. The ThunderClan leader shifted his paws uneasily, glancing from Graystripe to Millie.

Suddenly, another mew sounded. "May I speak?"

Hollypaw spun around. Daisy was padding forward. The cream-colored queen slid between Spiderleg and Birchfall and stepped into the center of the clearing. Hollypaw pricked her ears. Daisy had never spoken at a Clan meeting before.

"I am glad Millie has chosen to keep her name," the she- cat began. Her soft mew trembled a little. "I am no warrior, but I am a ThunderClan cat. I stay in the nursery rather than hunt and fight because that is what I do best. I care for our young as though each kit were my own. This is my gift to the Clan, but I do it in my own chosen name."

"She is right!" Brook stepped forward. "My loyalty lies with ThunderClan, but I would never give up the name given to me by the Tribe."

Stormfur padded forward and ran his tail along his mate's flank. "Is there any cat here who would not trust Millie or Daisy or Brook to fight on their side?" He stared challengingly around the Clan.

"No!" Graystripe led the call and Brambleclaw, Cloudtail, Whitewing, and the others quickly took it up. Daisy's kits, Berrynose, Hazeltail, and Mousewhisker cheered loudest of all. Hollypaw watched uneasily.

Suddenly, Thornclaw's mew rose above the others. "Stop! What would the other Clans say if they could see us now?"

Dustpelt narrowed his eyes. "Naming ceremonies are part of the warrior code. Can we ignore them and still keep the respect of the other Clans?"

Hollypaw swept her tail over the ground. Thornclaw and Dustpelt were right. Millie, Daisy, and Brook were important to the Clan, but unless they accepted all the customs of the Clan, how could they truly be part of it?

Firestar's eyes flashed. "Silence!" he snapped. "Don't forget you're talking about your Clanmates! I invited Daisy, Brook, and Millie to

join ThunderClan because they make us stronger." He glared around the clearing. "You are happy to eat their fresh-kill and to have them fight beside you. Do you want me to throw them out because they have the wrong names? Do you want the other Clans to tell us what to do?"

"Of course not!" Graystripe meowed.

"Millie and Brook are warriors already," Brambleclaw put in. "Names make no difference."

That's not true! Hollypaw dug her claws into the earth. They had not had proper naming ceremonies; the Clan was ignoring a ritual that had been followed for countless moons. What would StarClan think? We must live by the warrior code! She stared at Thornclaw, willing him to speak, but he only dipped his head to their leader.

Firestar blinked at him and turned once more to Millie. "You may keep your name. We have seen your loyalty and your skill at hunting. You are ThunderClan now. May StarClan recognize you as a true warrior."

"ThunderClan! ThunderClan!" Birchfall began the chant and the others quickly joined in. Hollypaw watched in silence, noticing Dustpelt and Thornclaw exchange anxious glances.

"Don't you feel like cheering?" Squirrelflight had weaved her way to Hollypaw's side.

Hollypaw's whiskers quivered. "What if StarClan doesn't recognize her as a true warrior?"

"Do you really think StarClan is narrow-minded?" Squirrelflight murmured.

"We have the warrior code for a reason and this goes against it." Hollypaw's fur rippled along her spine.

Squirrelflight smoothed Hollypaw's fur with her tail. "Don't forget that Firestar was a kittypet once."

"But he still took a warrior name!" Hollypaw mewed hotly. "He

followed the warrior path and trained as an apprentice." The cheers were dying away as the cats began to return to their duties. Cats can't just change the warrior code!

Chapter 9

"...any Windclan warriors, they'll wish they'd never come near our border!" Berrynose called to the patrol. "And don't you worry, Lionpaw. I can protect you from those big scary cats. Just stand back and watch a real warrior show you how it's done." Lionpaw could feel a growl rising in his throat. Whitewing is leading the patrol, not you. How was it possible the cream tom was even more obnoxious as a warrior than he had been as an apprentice?

Ashfur looked back at him, his eyes narrowing as he heard the rumble coming from his apprentice. "Be quiet." He whispered sharply. "Berrynose is a warrior, and you're still an apprentice. He deserves your respect. Show it and Firestar may let you graduate too one day."

But I want to be a warrior now! More than that, Berrynose had only become a warrior a few days ago. If he was being a snobby mouse-brain, Lionpaw should be allowed to get mad at him. Why did Ashfur get to tell him how to feel?

"There's a dog attack!" Whitewing's yowl jerked Lionpaw from his thoughts. He blinked against the rain, looking for any sign of the dogs under the tree canopy, barely lit by the gray morning sky above. There was no sign.

"Where are they?" Brightheart asked, her eyes flitting around the forest much like Lionpaw's.

"On Windclan territory," Whitewing reported. "Can't you hear them?" Now that she mentioned it, as Lionpaw strained his ears, he could hear barking coming from the moor...and cats shrieking as well.

Lionpaw's heart was still pounding like a woodpecker on oak. "I hope Heatherpaw is okay!" The pretty tabby she-cat he had met at the gathering did live in Windclan. "Are we going to help?" He asked.

"We must!" Whitewing declared, already turning to cross the stream that formed the border. "They could be wiped out!"

Spiderleg blinked. "Have you forgotten the last time Thunderclan tried to face a pack of dogs?"

Brightheart stiffened, momentarily digging her claws into the ground. Lionpaw knew she had lost half her face when she'd confronted a pack of vicious dogs many moons ago, back in the forest.

Ashfur dropped his gaze and Lionpaw caught a rare look of sadness in it...was that grief? "We lost many good cats." He murmured.

"Windclan can look after themselves!" Berrynose called out, apparently missing Ashfur's words. "This serves them right for trying to scare us away for a moon straight!"

Whitewing paused, her eyes tinged with sympathy as she looked between Brightheart and Ashfur. "What do you think?" She asked gently.

Ashfur stayed silent for once, but Brightheart stepped up to meet the gazes of each cat in the patrol. "We nearly lost everything when the dogs attacked us." She held her head high, but Lionpaw could see she was trembling. "We can't let the same thing happen to Windclan."

"But if we go," Spiderleg cut in, "We risk leading them back to Thunderclan territory. Shouldn't we protect our clanmates first?"

"They might find their way here anyway." Ashfur replied, finally raising his head again and looking more like himself.

Whitewing dipped her head in thanks to the older warrior. "Exactly. Windclan territory is too close to our own for us to ignore this."

Brightheart nodded. "We may be risking our lives to save Windclan, but ultimately we will be defending Thunderclan from a deadly enemy."

"We have to save them! They'll be indebted to us after this!"

Berrynose called, a smirk on his face.

Spiderleg paced in an agitated circle. "We have to drive the dogs away!"

Lionpaw clawed at the ground. My first battle! "Let's go then!"

Whitewing looked over Lionpaw briefly, her eyes betraying some amount of pity. "Is he ready for this?" She asked Ashfur. The spotted gray warrior paused before he nodded curtly, and Lionpaw felt a rush of pride.

With that, the white she-cat raced towards the stream, and soon Brightheart and Spiderleg pelted after her, landing next to Ashfur. Lionpaw followed them, his fur brushing against Berrynose's pelt as they raced side by side.

The patrol pounded out of the camp, picking up speed as it headed into Windclan territory. Would they get there in time? What if the dogs were already at the camp? Images of vicious fangs flashed in Lionpaw's mind, making his tail tremble. He unsheathed his claws and pushed harder against the sodden earth.

He scanned the moorland as the patrol streamed up into Windclan's territory, but the wind drove the rain into his eyes. A distant howl ripped the air. A panicked meow shrieked from over the heather. "We have to lead them away from the camp!"

"This way!" Whitewing called.

Berrynose pulled ahead of him, his drenched cream fur bristling into spines. Lionpaw lengthened his stride. The springy grass beneath his paws made it easy to speed along between the gorse thickets. Ahead he could see Brightheart's powerful shoulders rise and fall as the warrior bounded through the dripping heather.

A shaggy-haired black-and-white shape streaked across the grass ahead. It sped swiftly over the rough moorland, yelping and snarling. Two cats fled only tail-lengths ahead of its snapping jaws. Lionpaw recognized the black pelt of Crowfeather and, with a jolt of panic, he saw Heatherpaw beside him, her brown pelt pale

against the grass.

"They're leading it away from the camp," Brightheart realized. He skidded to a halt and the patrol pulled up beside him. Lionpaw dug his claws into the earth and slammed to a stop.

A second dog was pelting in the other direction, its shoulders pumping as it sped across the grass. Two more Windclan warriors—one black, one light brown—swerved out from the heather ahead of it. The dog spotted them and chased them down a rock-strewn slope. Its eyes flashed with triumph, and its yelps grew higher pitched as it began to catch up.

Suddenly Ashfur and Spiderleg darted out from the rocks at the foot of the slope. They raced side by side up the hillside, past the two Windclan cats. Lionpaw stared in shock. They were heading straight for the dog! The dog's eyes gleamed as they drew nearer. Then they parted, like a stream breaking around a rock. The dog twisted and lunged toward Ashfur. Lionpaw heard Whitewing gasp in terror as its jaws closed only an inch from his mentor's flank. The Thunderclan warrior ducked into a narrow crack between the rocks and left the dog spinning in confusion as the WindClan cats raced away from it.

"Dogs are bird-brained," Berrynose growled, though he seemed to be enjoying the thought. "They can think of only one thing at a time."

"Then let's give them as much to think about as we can!" Brightheart suggested.

Whitewing nodded, a smile growing as she understood what the ginger and white she-cat was saying. She flicked her tail toward a long dip in the earth, lined with craggy boulders. "Berrynose, you and Lionpaw should catch up with Crowfeather and Heatherpaw. Together you may be able to put up a fight. On the way, tell Ashfur and Spiderleg to help Nightcloud and Owlwhisker." Lionpaw guessed he was referring to the black and light brown cats he had seen near the rocks. Lionpaw's heart twisted with fear and excitement. "Brightheart and I will look for more dogs. Then we'll find the camp and help anyone who needs it. Meet there when you're done."

Berrynose nodded, and he and Lionpaw pelted toward Crowfeather and Heatherpaw. The two Windclan cats were still keeping the dog away from the camp, their paws sending up clumps of moss as they skimmed over the wet grass. The dog pounded after them, but they swerved one way and then the other, sending it skidding off course long enough to pull ahead for a while.

They must be exhausted , Lionpaw thought, pushing himself on as fast as he could. He could not take his eyes off Heatherpaw. She raced bravely beside her mentor, her pelt slick with rain, following his movements step for step.

"Crowfeather!" Berrynose yowled to the WindClan warrior as he cut across their path. Crowfeather stared in surprise.

"We've come to help!" Lionpaw called to Heatherpaw. She jerked her head to look at him and stumbled. A rabbit hole had caught her paw, and she crashed to the ground. Lionpaw gasped in horror as the dog swung toward her. Without thinking, he turned and raced for the dog. Crowfeather had already swerved to a halt and was heading back to help his apprentice. Berrynose yowled a battle cry and joined the chase.

Heatherpaw struggled to her paws and began to run, but the dog was nearly on top of her. Screeching in fury, Lionpaw launched himself at the dog's flank and gripped its coarse pelt. The dog yelped and spun, snapping at Lionpaw but unable to reach him. Lionpaw hauled his way onto the dog's back and dug in his claws. The dog tried to shake him off, but Lionpaw would not let go. Crowfeather leaped at the dog's face, raking its muzzle before swerving away from it. Berrynose darted underneath the dog's paws, chomping into its foreleg so viciously that blood spurted from the wound. Lionpaw felt the dog stumble beneath him and dug his claws in harder.

The dog, yowling in pain, tried to shake Lionpaw off again. Lionpaw held on, looking for Heatherpaw, desperate to see if she was safe. His heart plummeted when he saw her pale brown pelt flash toward the dog.

"What are you doing?" he screeched.

"Helping you!" she yowled back. She darted behind the dog and raked its hind legs with her claws. The dog yelped and fell. It rolled onto Lionpaw, and he shrieked in surprise. The wet, mossy earth cushioned him as the dog scrambled off him and turned. Its jaws dripped with blood and foam as it lunged toward him with a snarl. Lionpaw flipped onto his paws and darted out of the way. He heard jaws snap behind him and then another agonized yelp. He turned to see Berrynose rearing at the dog, slashing its muzzle with his forepaws. Crowfeather joined him while Heatherpaw dashed behind the dog and snapped at its hind legs. Lionpaw raced to help her, and together they slashed and nipped and clawed until the dog turned tail and fled. Lionpaw began to give chase, but Crowfeather called him back.

"I think it's had enough!"

Lionpaw skidded to a halt and watched as the massive dog howled away from its attackers. Where was the other dog? He glanced around and saw with a thrill that it was already racing away into the heather. It spattered the bushes with blood as it hurried to catch up to its companion.

Whitewing padded out from the gorse, her fur hanging out in clumps and one ear stained with blood, but her eyes shining. Brightheart emerged beside her, followed by Tornear and Harepaw.

"Where are Ashfur and Spiderleg?" Brightheart called.

"Here!" Ashfur's mew sounded from the heather on the slope above them. He bounded out from the springy bushes, Spiderleg, Nightcloud, and Owlwhisker following.

"Windclan owes you a debt of thanks," Crowfeather meowed formally.

Whitewing dipped her head. "May we accompany you back to the camp? I want to be sure that all's well there."

Crowfeather narrowed his eyes, then nodded. "Follow us," he meowed, turning and heading away over the grass. Lionpaw fell in beside Heatherpaw as they followed their mentors back to the

WindClan camp. The rain was beginning to ease, but Lionpaw could still feel water running along his whiskers.

"Are you okay?" he whispered.

She glanced at him with her soft purple gaze. "I'm fine."

Lionpaw's body ached a little where the dog had fallen on him, but he was entirely unharmed otherwise. He was thankful for the mossy earth that had softened the fall.

"You were very brave, leaping on the dog like that," Heatherpaw mewed. She pointed ahead with her muzzle. "We're here," she told him.

Gorse and heather interlaced with pricking brambles formed a barrier around a dip in the earth. Lionpaw followed Heatherpaw as she wove her way through a complicated tunnel. Suddenly they emerged in a clearing open to the gray sky; around its edge, Lionpaw saw tunnels leading into the thick hedge, and he guessed that was where the dens were hidden.

As the patrol entered the camp, faces peered from the dens, and cats began to creep out into the open. A kit was squealing, its tiny cry filled with fear.

"Hush, Sedgekit," a pale queen soothed from somewhere deep inside the brambles. Onestar slid out from a tunnel near to where the kit was still mewling.

"We chased them off," Tornear reported.

"Good," Onestar meowed.

"How are the kits?" Crowfeather asked.

"Frightened, but they'll recover," Onestar answered. More Windclan cats began to emerge. Lionpaw recognized some from the Gathering. They stared warily at the Thunderclan cats.

"A Thunderclan patrol arrived to help," Crowfeather told Onestar.

The Windclan leader let his gaze slide over the Thunderclan cats. "Windclan thanks you," he meowed evenly, dipping his head.

"We heard the dogs from the border," Whitewing explained. "I hope you will forgive our crossing the markers, but we were not sure how many dogs threatened you."

"Fortunately we already knew they were coming, thanks to Barkface." Onestar nodded to the brown medicine cat. "StarClan warned him, and we had a plan ready to draw them away from the camp."

"Your plan was working," Brightheart meowed.

"But we could never have chased off the dogs without you," Heatherpaw put in. "The dogs were faster than I ever imagined." She glanced sideways at Lionpaw. "Lionpaw saved me from one of them."

Crowfeather instantly wove between the two apprentices, blocking their view. "That was brave, Lionpaw, but WindClan is perfectly capable of taking care of its own cats."

Lionpaw felt anger flare inside him. No other cat had been near enough to the dog to reach it before it had harmed Heatherpaw. "But—"

Ashfur silenced him with a warning twitch of his tail, and Lionpaw looked down at his paws.

The brambles shivered as Breezepaw raced into the camp. "No damage to the barrier," he called.

"Have you checked it all the way around?" Crowfeather asked.

Breezepaw glared at his father. "Of course! That's what Whitetail ordered me to do."

Nightcloud stepped forward. "You should have more faith in our son, Crowfeather," she chided.

"Whitetail's my mentor, not you," Breezepaw added.

"Are those Thunderclan cats?" A light brown tabby she-cat had crept out of the tunnel behind Onestar. "Why are they here? I thought we were keeping-"

The pale gray queen hurried out of the tunnel, putting her tail over the kit's mouth before she could continue. "Thistlekit, come away," she called. "You'll get wet out here." Thistlekit glared at her mother and stomped back inside.

"W-we should go," Whitewing meowed, stammering as she recognized the tension that had suddenly filled the camp. She dipped her head to Onestar. "Those dogs won't dare come near this part of your territory again."

"If they do, we can manage them by ourselves," Breezepaw muttered.

"Breezepaw!" Nightcloud snapped. "Heatherpaw might have been hurt without this brave apprentice." She blinked gratefully at Lionpaw.

Lionpaw glanced away, conscious that Heatherpaw wouldn't have stumbled if he hadn't distracted her. But when he looked back, the she-cat was looking at him with her head lowered.
"Lionpaw...would you like to meet up tonight? Just so I can thank you properly?" Heatherpaw asked him.

Lionpaw's eyes lit up, and he nodded ecstatically. "That would be great! I'd love to see you again." He could feel his heart beating through his chest. Was it always that strong?

"It's time to go!" Whitewing turned and headed out of the camp. The rest of the patrol filed after her. As they followed the twisting tunnel back up to the moorland, he felt all of the eyes from Windclan's camp staring them down as they left, and he wondered if Windclan's thickly scented border would still be there during his next patrol. But thoughts of tension between the clans quickly slid away, replaced with the memory of heather-colored eyes and a soft voice asking to see him again.

Lionpaw slipped around the edge of the clearing and pushed his

way among the brambles beside the medicine den. He knew he could climb the cliff behind them. Reaching up through the prickly branches he felt the first ledge with his paws and hauled himself up. Then, moving carefully so as not to send grit showering down, he scrambled up from ledge to ledge until finally he pulled himself onto the grass at the top. Panting a little, he began to creep around the edge of the hollow.

"Lionpaw!" A soft mew hissed from beneath the ferns ahead. He froze as Heatherpaw slipped out from beneath the arching fronds. "Thank StarClan it's you."

"Did you drop those pebbles?" Lionpaw stared at her in alarm. What if she were caught here? "Is everything okay?"

"I had to see you!"

He felt a glow inside his chest. She was even braver than he thought. But he had to get her away from the camp.

"Follow me," he hissed. He hared off lakeward down the slope. But Heatherpaw didn't follow.

"Come on!" Lionpaw begged, skidding around and looking back.

Her eyes were shining. "Don't go that way! I've got something to show you!" She turned and ducked away under the ferns.

Lionpaw hurried after her. "Where are we going?"

"Wait and see!"

She seemed to be heading toward the old fox den. Lionpaw slowed down. "Be careful!" he warned.

"It's okay," she told him. "There aren't any foxes." She paused in front of the thick brambles that crowded the bottom of a steep slope. "Wait here."

She dived beneath them, and Lionpaw watched her tail disappear into the dense foliage, making the bushes tremble. Where was she going? An owl called in the branches above his head. Lionpaw

fluffed out his fur and glanced around nervously.

"Here!" Lionpaw looked up the steep slope and saw Heatherpaw blinking at him from the entrance to a small tunnel.

"What are you doing in there?" It looked like a rabbit burrow.

"You'll never believe what's inside! Come on!" Heatherpaw scooted backward into the darkness.

Paws pricking, Lionpaw squirmed under the bush, feeling the brambles brush against his fur in the small space. He heaved himself up the slope, out of the thorny tangle, and paused at the burrow entrance. "Heatherpaw?" he called, his heart pounding.

"Come inside!" Her mew echoed strangely from the shadows.

Lionpaw squeezed in after her. The tunnel was pitch-black. Crouching, he wriggled forward, damp earth pressing against his pelt. What was Heatherpaw up to? This place was hardly big enough for a rabbit, let alone a cat. Suddenly, he felt space around him, cold air washing over his fur. The tunnel had widened. Relieved, he straightened up and padded forward until he felt Heatherpaw's breath on his cheek.

"It leads to a cave!" she mewed. "There are loads of tunnels under this part of the hill, and one of them leads right to Windclan territory."

"How in StarClan's name did you find it?"

"Breezepaw sent me to catch mice between the rocks just over the top of the moor, not far from camp. I chased one down into a crack and realized that the crack opened into a tunnel. When I went inside I found that there were tunnels leading everywhere."

"Weren't you frightened of getting lost?"

"I explored slowly at first, making sure I got to know each route really well before trying another. And then I found one that led to a cave. It's amazing. There's a hole in the roof where the light comes in. Then I found a way into your territory!" Her mew was

triumphant. "Isn't it wonderful?"

Lionpaw could hardly believe his ears. "A tunnel from our territory to yours!" he gasped. "That's fantastic! If there was an attack or a fire, Thunderclan could use it to escape—"

"No!" Heatherpaw's mew was sharp with frustration. "We mustn't tell anyone else. Don't you see? This can be our place!"

"Our place?"

"We can meet here without anyone ever finding us!"

Even Hollypaw won't guess where I'm going! Lionpaw thought with pride, remembering their fox escapade as kits. Lionpaw's whiskers twitched. "That's a great idea! You're brilliant, Heatherpaw."

She purred and rubbed her muzzle quickly along Lionpaw's cheek, then turned away. "Follow me. I'll show you the cave." Her paw steps disappeared into the darkness. Fear surged in Lionpaw's belly. He fought the urge to rush back out into the forest, and began to follow Heatherpaw. The blackness pressed in on him and suddenly he realized how Jaypaw must feel. He sniffed, searching for scents of fox, or rabbit or even badger, but smelled only damp earth. It was stale and musty as though no creature had walked here for moons.

"How come no one else uses this place?" he wondered.

"I guess no one's been lucky enough to find it." Heatherpaw's mew echoed eerily up ahead.

"Someone must have discovered it before."

"I've never smelled anything here except rock and water."

Uneasiness tugged at Lionpaw's pelt. "But it seems unlikely that we're the first—" Suddenly, the tunnel brightened and opened into a large cave. Lionpaw stopped dead and stared around in astonishment. The rocky walls were lit by moonlight filtering through a small hole in the roof, just like Heatherpaw had said. The floor was smooth, dusty stone, rippled here and there as if giant

paw prints had left their shape. And most amazing of all, a river wound across the floor and flowed away into a low, broad tunnel, disappearing into shadow. A river underground? How could that be?

"Isn't it brilliant?" Heatherpaw leaped up onto a rocky ledge. "It'll be like our own camp! We could be DarkClan. I'll be the leader and you can be my deputy!"

"Deputy? What if I wanted to be leader?" Lionpaw objected, scrabbling past her onto a higher ledge.

"I found the place, so I'm leader!" Heatherpaw jumped at him and knocked him off his perch.

Purring, Lionpaw landed lightly on the floor of the cave. "Okay, Heatherstar," he mewed. "What's the plan?"

"Let's try exploring! We have to learn about our territory if we are to protect it. I think I've heard a river down here..."

"Lionpaw, wake up!"

Lionpaw felt a soft paw nudging him in the ribs. He jerked his head up, surprised to find rock walls surrounding him. Then he remembered. He was in the cave. Heatherpaw was sitting beside him, her eyes bleary with sleep.

"Look!" She jerked her head toward the gap in the roof. "We dozed off." The sky outside was pale with early morning light.

Lionpaw leaped to his paws. "I have to home!" He stared anxiously at the many tunnels opening around the walls of the cave. "Which one leads to Thunderclan?"

Heatherpaw padded to a narrow tunnel near the river's edge. "This way." She flicked her tail toward a wider tunnel in the facing wall. "I head up there." Her eyes glittered. "Will you come again tonight?"

"Yes." Lionpaw could hardly wait. "If I can get away."

"Hello, Lionpaw." Sandstorm was guarding the entrance. "I didn't

see you go out."

Lionpaw's mew was muffled by his mouthful of feathers. "I went through the dirtplace tunnel." His tail pricked at the lie, but he had no choice.

"Looks like someone's going to have a nice early breakfast," Sandstorm commented.

"Mmmm." Lionpaw nodded, whisking past her into the camp.

Hollypaw was lying beside the halfrock with Jaypaw. She looked up as Lionpaw entered the camp. Flicking his tail at her, he dropped his catch on the pile.

"You must have been up early," Jaypaw mewed as he clambered onto the smooth halfrock and began to wash.

"The birds make so much noise, I'm surprised you can sleep through them," Lionpaw replied, thinking fast.

Hollypaw narrowed her eyes. "After the hunt Thornclaw took me on yesterday, I'd have slept through anything."

Lionpaw wiped a paw over one ear. Inside, his stomach was a hard knot. He hated lying. He wasn't doing any harm by playing with Heatherpaw. But he knew his Clanmates wouldn't see it like that. I'm loyal to my Clan , Lionpaw told himself. I shouldn't have to prove it . But still, the bitter taste of his lie stung in his throat.

Chapter 10

"We'll be doing some battle training today." Thornclaw meowed curtly. As usual he started by getting right into business to make use of the time rather than starting with a series of greetings and small-talk. Hollypaw didn't mind it at all, but it was very different from Leafpool's approach. When she had been in the medicine den, she and her mentor would spend much of the day talking to each other while doing other odd jobs.

But she was going to be a warrior now, and she couldn't be happier. This training would make her strong enough to be a worthwhile member of the clan! They climbed the slope outside the camp, heading away from the lake, and followed the track that led down to the mossy hollow that the apprentices used for battle training. As they padded through the trees, Hollypaw heard energetic mews up ahead. She sniffed the air. Cinderpaw and Birchfall were already there. Through the trees she glimpsed the small gray tabby rushing toward her mentor. The brown warrior twisted faster than a leaf caught in a breeze, and Cinderpaw hurtled past, missing him entirely.

"No, not like that." Birchfall meowed. "I told you before. Aim for where you think I'm going to be, not where I am!"

"Sorry!" Cinderpaw panted. "Can I try it one more time?"

Hollypaw padded down the bank and into the clearing. "Hello," she mewed.

"Oh, were you planning to give Hollypaw battle training today?" Birchfall asked the older warrior.

Thornclaw nodded. "But don't leave Birchfall. I think it would be good for Hollypaw to have a sparring partner her age to get her caught up faster, once I've taught her the basics."

"Great!" Cinderpaw mewed. "We can train together." The other

apprentice ran up to Hollypaw, laying her tail on the black she-cat's shoulder encouragingly. "I'm sure you'll do great." She whispered. "Maybe we could try that move again first?"

Birchfall nodded. "Just remember—" But Cinderpaw was already hurtling toward him. He whipped around in a circle once more, and once more dodged neatly out of her path.

"Come on," Thornclaw meowed to Hollypaw. "We'll use that space over there." He pointed with his nose to the far side of the mossy green clearing. Hollypaw noticed how smooth and soft it looked. Perfect for fighting on. No roots to trip over, no leaves to skid on.

"We will begin with a defensive move so you can recognize it when it is used against you during your offense." Thornclaw turned his back on Hollypaw and meowed over his shoulder, "Watch me first, then copy my movements." After a moment, he twisted around and rolled onto his back before springing back up onto his paws. The whole move was over in a heartbeat. "Like that."

Hollypaw nodded. "I think I've got it." She ducked her head, twisted around, and rolled over, leaping to her paws again in an instant.

Birchfall's eyes lit up with surprise. "Was that your first go?" called across the clearing.

"Yes," Hollypaw answered. "Did I do it right?" She glanced anxiously at her mentor.

"That was about right," Thornclaw told her.

"Are you kidding? That was incredible!" Cinderpaw piped up.

Thornclaw blinked, flicking his tail to indicate both other cats should get back to their own training. "Let's try something else."

The golden-brown warrior demonstrated a few more moves, and Hollypaw copied each one with the same fierce intensity. Although Birchfall made no more comments, she knew he was keeping one eye on her.

"Now," Thornclaw spoke again after a while. "Run at me and try to

get past me."

"How?" Hollypaw asked.

"Any way you can," Thornclaw told her. "We'll discuss tactics afterward."

Hollypaw crouched down and stared at her mentor. Just...doing things without preparation wasn't usually her style. But Thornclaw wasn't like Dustpelt or Ferncloud. He asked for this. Her gaze flitted to a sapling at the edge of the clearing behind the Thornclaw. That was where she would aim. Her mentor was merely an obstacle to avoid. She darted forward, aware that he was rearing onto his hind legs, ready to bring his weight down on Hollypaw the moment she tried to slip past. Hollypaw saw that the warrior was leaning back a little and guessed that his weight was mostly balanced on one side. With lightning speed, she swerved the other way. Thornclaw didn't have a chance to rebalance herself, and he slammed down a mouse-length away from where Hollypaw flashed by.

Hollypaw felt a rush of triumph as she reached the sapling and spun to see Thornclaw blinking with surprise. Then a prick of guilt jabbed her. Was she meant to be faster than her mentor?

"That was quite good." Thornclaw meowed, his chest rising and falling quickly.

"Yes, it was!" Birchfall was padding over from the other side of the clearing, Cinderpaw on his heels.

"You were so fast!" Cinderpaw complimented her.

"Thanks!" Hollypaw trotted back to Thornclaw's side.

Birchfall dipped his head toward Leafpool. "Tell me if I'm butting in," he began, "but I think Cinderpaw and Hollypaw could benefit from training together now. Cinderpaw has more energy than a well-fed rabbit, and she has more experience than Hollypaw. But Hollypaw clearly has a tactical eye, both for judging her opponent's weakness and the moments she should strike."

Hollypaw was almost too excited to speak. A warrior was impressed

with her fighting ability!

"I don't see why not," Thornclaw meowed.

Birchfall flicked his tail. "Cinderpaw, why don't you show Hollypaw that fighting move we've been practicing?"

Cinderpaw led Hollypaw into the center of the clearing. The sunshine flooding through the branches overhead dappled her smoky pelt. "You come at me, and I'm going to try to unbalance you."

Hollypaw took a quick breath, then threw herself at Cinderpaw. Before she knew what was happening, Cinderpaw had knocked one of her forelegs from under her with a powerful front paw, then tipped her over with a rolling shove from her hind legs.

Hollypaw scrambled to her feet and shook herself. "Wow!" she mewed, impressed. "Can I try?" She wanted to try the move in a slightly different way. As soon as Cinderpaw rushed her, she ducked her head, knocking Cinderpaw's forepaw from under her with her muzzle. She was so low to the ground that it was easy to roll onto her side from there and thrust her hind legs in a powerful kick that sent Cinderpaw flying.

Cinderpaw scrambled to her paws. "I love the way you used your muzzle instead of your paw! It made your rollover much smoother. Can I try it that way on you?"

"Sure!"

Cinderpaw lunged for Hollypaw, this time using her muzzle to unbalance her, just as Hollypaw had done. She finished the move with a hind kick so much quicker that it sent Hollypaw skidding backward across the clearing. Hollypaw sat up, panting.

"That was great, you two," Birchfall praised them.

"Will you teach me how to do a back kick?" the gray apprentice begged.

"It'll be dusk soon," Birchfall observed. "I think we should head back

to camp."

The sky was darkening above the trees, and the air was growing chillier. Even so, Hollypaw was sorry to leave the mossy clearing. Her body felt bruised and tired, but her mind was buzzing as she tried to work out how to make the moves she had learned even better. As she followed Birchfall and Cinderpaw up the bank and into the trees, Thornclaw fell into step beside her. "Birchfall was right. You do have a natural sense for how to best make use of your time and movement. It's impressive." Hollypaw was thrilled to receive the compliment. Thornclaw didn't give her many, but when he did she knew he meant it. Joy surged through her paws, making them light as dandelion floss. "But given how late you effectively started your apprenticeship, you probably needed a boost like this to pass in time with your brother. I still expect you to work with the utmost focus."

Hollypaw nodded. Of course she would work hard! Now that she had finally found where her talents lay, she wasn't going to stop until she made the most of them. She had a "tactical eye" as Birchfall had called it and fierce dedication to the warrior code. Maybe one day, I could be clan leader!

As the group pushed through the entrance, Foxkit and Icekit burst from the nursery entrance in a flurry of fur and whiskers.

"Don't stray into the clearing," Ferncloud's voice called from inside the den. "I don't want you getting under anyone's paws!"

"We won't," Icekit replied. The white she-kit flicked her brother's russet-colored muzzle with her tail. Foxkit retaliated with a lunge that sent her tumbling toward Hollypaw. Hollypaw steadied the snow-white kit with her paw.

"Hi, Hollypaw!" Icekit glanced up at her, then spun and leaped at her brother. She tumbled him over, grasped him with a paw behind each cheek, and began to pummel him enthusiastically with her hind paws.

"Tuck your head in, Foxkit, and give her a good nip!" Hollypaw called.

Icekit squeaked and let go of her brother. "That's not fair," she wailed. "You're helping him."

"It doesn't look like you need any help!" Hollypaw mewed. Foxkit hurled himself at his sister.

"Duck!" Hollypaw warned the snowy kit. Icekit rolled out of the way just in time, and Foxkit skidded past her into the frosty grass outside the apprentices' den. He turned and, crouching low, prowled back toward Icekit.

"Not so fast," Hollypaw advised. Icekit was waiting with her chest pressed to the ground and her tail lashing excitedly. "Let her come to you."

Foxkit stared at his sister, his eyes defiant. "She won't dare come near me!"

Icekit wriggled closer, unable to resist her brother's challenge. Foxkit waited until she was so close that her breath billowed in his face.

"Get behind her now!" Hollypaw urged. Foxkit darted out of the grass and shot behind Icekit. By the time she had spun around he had jumped onto her back and was rolling her onto her side.

"You two are going to make great warriors!" Hollypaw purred.

Before long Hollypaw could see the silhouette of the fallen tree bridging the gap between shore and island. Her paws tingled, and she quickened her step. Firestar and Sandstorm were already crossing, with Squirrelflight and Honeypaw right behind them, while Brackenfur and Brambleclaw waited their turn next to Leafpool.

"I assume you're ready?" Thornclaw asked as he caught up to her by the tree-bridge.

"Absolutely!" she mewed.

"Up you go, then." Thornclaw waited while Hollypaw scrambled up among the tangled roots. She unsheathed her claws, ready for the

slippery bark. Gripping on tightly, she wove her way among the twigs and knotholes, relieved when she had crossed the black, lapping water and could jump down onto the shore.

While the other cats crossed behind her, Hollypaw watched for Firestar's signal. Moonlight glittered on the lake beyond the trees, and she could smell the scents of the other clans already on the island. Her heart thumped as hard as rabbits' paws when Firestar nodded and headed into the undergrowth.

Hollypaw couldn't wait to talk to her fellow apprentices. She was one of them now, and she realized how much she had felt like an outsider when she had been a medicine cat apprentice.

It looked different from the last time. Some of the previously deep green leaves had turned to pale yellows, browns, and oranges, and many dried pine needles had begun to litter the ground. Ahead it looked like only Windclan was in the clearing so far. Given the relationship Thunderclan had with them at the moment, that might not end well.

"Heatherpaw!" Lionpaw's call jerked her from her thoughts, and she saw him run over to a brown tabby she-cat. She followed along behind her brother, curious as to who she was.

The she-cat's face lit up as she turned to look at the Thunderclan apprentice. "Hey Lionpaw! Nice to see you could come tonight."

"You too!" Lionpaw purred.

"Who is this?" Hollypaw cut in. Lionpaw seemed very friendly with her. She knew he had to have talked to some cats during the last gathering but it was surprising to see how close they seemed after one night.

Lionpaw tilted his head, staring at Hollypaw as if she had asked to try a fish. "It's Heatherpaw."

Hollypaw let out a deep sigh, rolling her eyes. Of course she knew the she-cat's name.

Heatherpaw, meanwhile, let out a small purr of amusement. "I'm a

Windclan apprentice," she told Hollypaw. "We met at the last gathering, and recently he came in a patrol to help us with some dogs. He saved my life."

Lionpaw giggled in embarrassment, bending down to lick his chest fur to hide the flushing of his face.

Lionpaw has never been embarrassed about his accomplishments. At the very least he would always use them in arguments against Berrynose. It was possible he just didn't want to show off in front of another clan, but he didn't ever seem to take other clans seriously, let alone their opinions. What was going on with her brother? Then it hit her. The past several nights he came back to the den very late, if at all, and he had been more tired than ever. Was he...

Just then, thundering pawsteps grew closer and Riverclan burst onto the island with Mistystar in the lead. Hollypaw could spot the light gray pelt of Willowpaw coming towards her and felt a stab of guilt. She hadn't had time yet to tell her friend she was training as a warrior. She stepped away, leaving Lionpaw to talk with Heatherpaw for now.

"Hollypaw, it's nice to see you! Where is Leafpool?"

The black she-cat felt herself shuffling her paw against the ground as she tried to figure out what to say. Could they even be friends anymore? She was a warrior apprentice now. She wasn't supposed to look past clan borders for anything, even if she had made a friend when that wasn't the case. "Hi Willowpaw..." She trailed off. Even if this friendship wouldn't ever be as strong as she hoped, they could still see each other at gatherings. That wasn't against the warrior code. "I have something to tell you."

Willowpaw leaned forward, her cheery expression melting into one of worry. "What is it?"

She really liked Willowpaw. Even when she was a kit they had talked every time she visited with Mothwing. That couldn't be wrong could it? "I..." But she wasn't just training to be a warrior. She was supposed to become the arbiter of the warrior code. She couldn't take loopholes like that. "I'm training to be a warrior now.

Jaypaw is the medicine cat apprentice instead."

Willowpaw's gaze softened, and she took a seat next to Hollypaw. She could feel the Riverclan cat's fur brush her own. "You've got a lot on your shoulders for someone so young." She murmured. "Have you had some happiness as a warrior?"

"Yes!" Hollypaw responded immediately. "It's a much better fit for me than being a medicine cat."

"Then what's wrong?"

"Well..." Hollypaw closed her eyes, a small sigh escaping her mouth before she opened them once more. "You. I don't know how to treat you anymore, now that we can't be friends."

"Why can't we be friends?"

"It's against the warrior code! Warriors are supposed to be loyal to their clan alone!"

Willowpaw smiled, her eyes lit with pity as she wrapped her tail around the younger she-cat. "The warrior code says you're allowed to have friendship with cats outside your clan as long as your loyalty stays with your clan. And I'm a medicine cat. My duties require me to cross over clan borders already. I'm friendly with plenty of cats outside my own clan, not just the medicine cats."

Having friendships outside your clan without letting them affect your loyalty sounded risky. But Willowpaw was right. She was a medicine cat, so Hollypaw would never be asked to fight against her. "Are you sure?"

"I'm positive. You have nothing to worry about." The gray tabby stood up, seeing the medicine cats gathering beneath the tree as the meeting was about to start. "I'll be rooting for you!" She called.

A yowl sounded from the Great Oak. "Let the Gathering begin!" Firestar called. Hollypaw wove her way through her clanmates to sit between Leafpool and Brambleclaw. Lionpaw squeezed in beside her, this time with no Heatherpaw by his side. She might be able to be friends with Willowpaw, but two warrior apprentices being

friends was much more dangerous, and Lionpaw seemed to consider her more than a friend.

Blackstar spoke first. "Shadowclan has been doing well this past moon, despite some unnecessary tension on our border." The massive white tom gazed solemnly around the clans, pausing for a long while on Leopardstar. "We will not be pushed around by anyone."

Shadowclan cats began to take up a cheer but Hollypaw could hear some low grumbles as well. Leopardstar was glaring at the Shadowclan leader so firmly it seemed as though he was shooting something from his eyes. "Keeping our border clear does not count as tension, Blackstar."

Blackstar narrowed his eyes. "Who knows what the next seasons will bring? If you care so much about maintaining a border we never crossed now, perhaps in leaf-bare your desperation will drive you to cross it!"

"Why would they?" Ashfoot called from among Windclan.

"You would ask that, Windclan cat!" Dustpelt snarled. "Your clan has been pushing on our border as well!" Immediately the clearing erupted in a cacophony of hissing and growls, cats throating insults and threats at each other.

"Everyone stop it!" Mothwing called. The medicine cats turned to each other as the clearing slowly quieted, and something passed between them.

"Why do we always fall back into quarrelling like this?" Littlecloud asked.

Leopardstar shot back. "Is Starclan trying to send us a message? Could it be that we do not belong here?"

"I've had no signs from Starclan to suggest anything like that!" Leafpool put in quickly.

"Nor I!" Barkface agreed.

"The clans have always had to protect their borders from each other." Squirrelflight pointed out. "Even back in the forest!"

"Squirrelflight's right!" Onestar agreed.

"You're just agreeing with her so you can pretend you're alright on your own!" Birchfall growled from the back. "Whitewing and her patrol had to save your clanmates from dogs and you're not even grateful!"

Onestar's eyes lit up with fury. "Insolent mouse-brain!"

Leopardstar glanced sideways to Blackstar, and Hollypaw noticed her flick her tail, as though she was prompting the Shadowclan leader to do something.

Blackstar's eyes grew thin and hostile. "Littlecloud has had a sign!" he announced.

All eyes turned to Littlecloud. The Shadowclan medicine cat's pelt was ruffled, and his eyes were clouded with anxiety. "I dreamed that a warrior brought strange new prey into the camp, a bird I had never seen before. I bit into it and found its belly writhing with maggots."

Anxious whispers rippled around the clans. They were silenced by Blackstar. "Starclan is warning us that strangers are poisoning the clans!"

"They might be warning us to be wary of unfamiliar prey!" Leafpool objected.

A shadow fell over the clearing, and Hollypaw saw with dread that more thin clouds were passing in front of the moon. Starclan was definitely unhappy.

Blackstar glared at Firestar. "You have given a home to so many cats born outside the forest that you are weakening clan blood," he accused. "Why else would Starclan let us suffer?" He stared accusingly at the Thunderclan leader, then let his gaze sweep over Stormfur, Brook, Hazeltail, Berrynose, Mousewhisker, and Millie.

Outrage churned in Hollypaw's belly. They are all warriors! Even she had distant kittypet blood, but she was clanborn through and through. She admittedly had some doubts about them but no cat could justify this behavior!

"Kittypets and outsiders!" Oakfur sneered.

"You are destroying the warrior code!" Owlpaw yowled.

Brambleclaw's pelt bristled, and Stormfur got to his paws, curling his lip in a snarl. But Firestar's fierce gaze flashed across the clans, silencing them.

"We will not be blamed for clan hostility," he hissed. "Starclan led us here. Did any cat expect that life would suddenly be perfect once we arrived?"

The clans listened in silence at first; then some cats began to murmur in agreement as he went on. "Surely it is our struggle against hardship that makes us true warriors." He glared at Blackstar. "You think fresh blood in the clans will weaken us? A life without hardship would weaken us more."

Onestar nodded. "Blackstar talks as though Starclan should grant us nothing but blessings. Does he want us to live the spoiled life of kittypets?"

Blackstar shot him a look of cold fury.

Ashfur got to his paws. "Pure blood is no guarantee of virtue!"

"May I have permission to speak?" Hollypaw turned and saw Squirrelflight padding her way to the front of the clan. Firestar nodded. Squirrelflight gazed calmly around the clans. Hollypaw felt pride warming her pelt. Go on, Squirrelflight! "If we are to prevent suffering," Squirrelflight acknowledged. "We musn't let each small problem get to us. Leaf-fall is quickly approaching, and colder weather will soon be on its way. We need to find a way to look beyond our differences so we won't destroy each other more than hunger or sickness could!"

As she spoke, a cool breeze swept across the island. The clearing

brightened as the clouds started to drift away from the moon.

"Starclan agrees with her!"

"It's a sign!"

Pelts smoothed and tails fell still as the cats began to calm down.

Squirrelflight went on. "This will be our second leaf-fall by the lake. I suggest we celebrate with a special Gathering."

Hollypaw leaned forward, puzzled.

"While the moon is still full, we could meet in daylight."

"Why should we do that?" Blackstar snapped. "The truce comes only with the full moon."

"The moon is as full during the day as it is at night," Crowfeather pointed out.

"We should meet," Squirrelflight pressed, "to share skills and training methods. To show that we have not forgotten the Great Journey that brought us here, when the warrior code protected us as one."

"We could have contests!" For the first time Pebblepaw spoke. The Riverclan apprentice's eyes were shining with enthusiasm.

"The apprentices from each clan could compete against one another to see who has the best skills!" Heatherpaw called out.

Even Owlpaw looked interested. "I bet I could beat any Thunderclan cat at hunting!" he boasted.

"No cat could beat Pouncepaw at catching fish!" called Mistyfoot.

"That's cheating!" Lionpaw mewed. "Every cat knows only Riverclan enjoys getting their paws wet!"

Hollypaw realized that the clans' fear and anger had turned to excitement and friendly challenge. Her mother had distracted them

from accusations of impure blood by reminding them of the time they had united to make the Great Journey, and of how much they could still offer to one another. Hollypaw glanced up at Firestar. The Thunderclan leader sat in silence, his eyes gleaming with pride as he looked down at Squirrelflight.

Even Onestar seemed keen. "Where should we hold this competition?"

"We could meet here initially, but I suggest we host an event on each clan's territory," Firestar offered. "So long as every cat brings their own fresh-kill, it would be a way to make the competitions fair."

"The moon will still be almost full in two sunrises," Leopardstar meowed. "Shall we meet then?" She gazed around the clans. Heads were nodding and tails flicking with excitement. "Very well," Leopardstar concluded. She turned to Firestar. "If it's all right with you, we will meet at sunhigh." Firestar nodded.

Hollypaw shifted her paws, suddenly uneasy. The Gathering would be fun, but it wouldn't stop the other clans from blaming Thunderclan's mixed blood the next time something went wrong, or the pushing on both Shadowclan and Thunderclan borders.

"Then it's settled," Onestar agreed. He leaped down from the tree, followed by Firestar and Leopardstar. Only Blackstar lingered, his eyes burning with anger. But the Gathering was breaking up, the cats padding away from the clearing, chattering like starlings.

"Can you believe that?" Lionpaw asked.

Hollypaw glanced back at her mother, who was padding toward the trees beside Brambleclaw and Firestar. "Squirrelflight smoothed things over." But for how long?

Cinderpaw came hurtling up beside them as they neared the fallen tree. "I bet Lionpaw wins the hunting," she panted.

Lionpaw purred self-consciously. "Well, Hollypaw will win the fighting," he mewed. Despite the circumstances, a flash of pride

swelled in her chest.

Brook's quiet voice sounded behind them. "As long as you all try your best, your clan will be proud of you."

Hollypaw couldn't imagine not trying her best. Her pelt tingled. Perhaps this kind of Gathering might resolve something after all. It would be a chance for Thunderclan to prove to the other clans that they were all worthy warriors, and that being clanborn had nothing to do with it.

Chapter 11

Sunhigh was approaching—Jaypaw could feel the warmth on his back. He padded into the camp with a wad of dock leaves clasped in his jaws. The sour flavor had sucked all the moisture from his mouth. It disguised every other scent, and he had to rely on the memory of his paws to find the path back to the medicine den.

As he crossed the clearing, he could hear the paw steps of his Clanmates hurrying around him. The whole Clan had been busy since before dawn preparing for the daylight Gathering. They're only going to spend the day hunting and fighting , Jaypaw thought irritably. Why are they acting like it's something special? They get to do that anyway.

"Squirrelflight!" Firestar called down from the Highledge.

"Yes?" She sounded out of breath.

"Did you find a good place for the mock invasion?"

"I sent Brambleclaw out with a patrol," she replied. "He's checking it now. Around the mossy clearing might be best. It has a place to meet up that's easy to but plenty of undergrowth around for cover."

"Good," Firestar meowed. "Are there hunting patrols out? We don't want our visitors to think we are prey-poor."

"Two. Sorreltail and Brightheart are leading them."

"Jaypaw!" Firestar scrambled down from Highledge and caught up to him. "Leafpool will need your help today in case of any accidents. You won't be able to join in any of the contests, I'm afraid."

The whole Clan had been tiptoeing around him like mice since the daylight Gathering had been announced, too scared to say out loud what he knew they'd all been thinking—that he would be useless in any apprentice contest. He had noticed right away how they never

mentioned his name as they speculated about which apprentices would win. Jaypaw didn't reply to Firestar and scraped angrily through the bramble entrance to the medicine den.

"Oh, good!" Leafpool was waiting for him. "You found lots. Now we'll be ready for any scratches."

Brightheart was lying next to Cloudtail by the halfrock, washing herself. Jaypaw felt her hurt like thorns in his pads as he waited for Leafpool by the camp entrance. Firestar had promised Brightheart that she could mentor Icekit or Foxkit when their turn came, but the warrior hadn't gotten over the pain of losing Jaypaw as her apprentice yet.

"Staring at her isn't going to make her forgive you." Leafpool's meow surprised Jaypaw; he didn't think his attention was that obvious.

"But she won't listen to me when I try to talk to her," Jaypaw mewed. "She just changes the subject or finds an excuse to go somewhere else."

"She'll listen when she's ready to hear," Leafpool advised. "She's had to fight hard to prove to her Clanmates that she's as good as them, and this must feel like a battle she has lost."

"I never meant to hurt her," Jaypaw mewed.

"It takes some cats longer to see past their weaknesses clearly enough to appreciate their strengths," Leafpool meowed. "And until they do, they feel every hurt like a tongue on raw flesh."

Jaypaw felt that Leafpool was urging him to understand more than Brightheart's anger, but he didn't want to think about it now. Jaypaw dropped the dock leaves on the ground. He flicked his tongue, trying to wet it again. "I don't see why we have to be responsible for all the other Clans," he complained. "If their apprentices want to show off on our territory, their own medicine cats should look after them."

"All the medicine cats will be working together to make sure every

cat is cared for properly," Leafpool reminded him. He sensed frustration in her Leafpool's quick movements as she stored the dock with the other herbs, but her mew was calm. "I know how much you want to take part, Jaypaw, but I need you to help me."

The fury that had been simmering in Jaypaw's belly suddenly bubbled over. "Don't lie!" he fumed. "I'm not allowed to take part because there's no way I can compete against real apprentices! Firestar doesn't want me embarrassing the Clan."

"You know that isn't true!" Leafpool told him, shocked.

"Then why doesn't he let me try one of the contests?"

"Maybe if you were a warrior apprentice he would!" Leafpool's mew was brittle as she tried to keep her temper. "But you made your choice. If Hollypaw was still my apprentice, she wouldn't take part either."

Jaypaw didn't reply. Could it really be called a choice when Leafpool and Starclan wouldn't rest until he chose the things they wanted him to?

Leafpool changed the subject. "Squirrelflight must be getting tired. She's been busy all morning. Will you take her some herbs?"

Jaypaw padded sulkily to the herb store and mixed the leaves Squirrelflight would need, then folded them in a wrap, which he picked up delicately between his teeth. He nosed his way out of the den and listened for his mother's voice. He found her beneath Highledge talking to Brambleclaw. Jaypaw dropped the herbs at Squirrelflight's paws. "Leafpool wants you to eat these."

"That's kind of her." Squirrelflight sniffed at the herbs. "Did you mix these yourself? They smell sweeter than usual."

"I put in some heather nectar to help with the taste," Jaypaw mumbled.

Squirrelflight thanked him with a brisk lick between his ears. "That was thoughtful."

"It's nothing," he muttered. He turned away before she could do anything else embarrassing, though he couldn't ignore the small glimmer of happiness that flickered in his chest.

Suddenly paw steps drummed through the entrance and skidded to a halt. It was Lionpaw and Hollypaw; their excitement howled into the camp like a rush of wind, rippling Jaypaw's fur.

"They're here!" Lionpaw panted.

Hollypaw trotted in circles, unable to keep still. "WindClan is heading down toward the lake!"

Foxkit's and Icekit's tiny paws pattered from the nursery. "Are they really here?" Foxkit demanded.

"Any sign of ShadowClan?" Icekit's mew was tinged with nervousness.

"Not yet," Lionpaw told him. "But it looks like just about the whole of WindClan has come."

"I wish we were old enough to go." Icekit mewed.

"We'll have fun here," Ferncloud called from the nursery entrance.

"Why do we have to stay in camp?" Foxkit wailed. "It's not fair."

"Life isn't fair," Jaypaw growled, and padded mutinously back to the medicine den. That's why I'm going to be stuck in camp like a kit!

Birchfall and Thornclaw pounded through the thorn tunnel, their patrols crowding after them. Jaypaw smelled the delicious flavors of fresh-kill. Every cat must have caught a piece of prey.

"Well done!" Firestar told them. "No cat will go hungry today."

A yowl rang through the forest above the hollow.

"That's Leopardstar!" Lionpaw mewed. "RiverClan has arrived!"

"It must be time to go," Hollypaw put in. "The Gathering starts at

sunhigh. Remember everyone, this is more than a day for fun. It's an opportunity to learn about our rivals, both as possible allies and enemies." Hollypaw was taking part in the contest on Riverclan territory, a match to see which apprentice had the best fighting skills.

"Well said Hollypaw." Dustpelt commented, radiating his satisfaction. At the same time, Lionpaw would be set against apprentices in WindClan in a race. Cinderpaw would be heading to Shadowclan for a hunting contest and even Poppypaw and Honeypaw, who would both be staying in Thunderclan, would be competing in a mock invasion. Jealousy seared Jaypaw's fur.

Rocks clattered from Highledge as Firestar bounded down into the clearing, but Jaypaw nosed his way into the medicine den, away from the eager mews of the warriors and apprentices as they paced impatiently around the entrance. He tried to block his ears as Firestar called "Good luck!" to the Clan. But he still heard the drumming of paws as ThunderClan raced away through the thorn tunnel. An eerie silence gripped the camp.

"Jaypaw." Leafpool's mew sounded from the herb store. "Will you help me make up some poultices?"

Jaypaw forced away his black thoughts and padded to Leafpool's side to begin chewing up some of the dock he had brought back earlier. As they worked, Icekit and Foxkit charged noisily around the clearing.

"Don't forget," Ferncloud was calling, "you each have to bring me a beetle, some moss, and a fly."

"I'm going to win!" Icekit mewed.

"No, you won't," Foxkit replied. "I'll find them first!"

Their mews echoed around the deserted camp, and Jaypaw was aware of the emptiness like hunger in the pit of his belly. Am I always going to be left behind?

"That's enough for now." Leafpool's mew took him by surprise.

"There's enough there for scratches on every cat in all four Clans."

Jaypaw spat out the last mouthful of dock and sat back on his haunches, licking his paws to clear the taste from his tongue.

"I should be at the Gathering, in case there are injuries," the medicine cat announced. "Besides, I want to go and watch Hollypaw fight. Why don't you come with me?"

Jaypaw shook his head. There was no way he was going if he wasn't allowed to take part.

"Very well." Leafpool didn't try to persuade him. Instead she padded quietly out of the den.

Left alone, Jaypaw suddenly felt lost. Far in the distance he could hear the excited cries of warriors and their apprentices drifting through the trees. He wanted to wail to StarClan that it wasn't fair. But he would not behave like a kit, however much he was treated like one. Instead, he began to tidy up the herbs, pushing all the leaves into neat piles and lining up the poultices, ready for any cats who might return injured.

Suddenly a strange sensation began to prick his tail. It crawled along his spine, setting his pelt tingling. Images flooded his mind, swelling behind his eyes. He was buried, unable to breathe, choking on dry earth soaked in the stench of rabbit and badger. His mind swirled in terror. Where was the badger? He expected to feel their teeth rip his flesh at any moment. He stared wildly around, but all he could see was crumbling brown soil. Above him light flickered, then dimmed as more soil tumbled down on him, stinging his eyes, filling his ears and nostrils. He was drowning—not in water this time, but earth.

"Help!" Dirt filled his mouth as he tried to scream. He scrabbled desperately, trying to fight his way out. Was StarClan so disappointed that they had ordered the earth to swallow him up? He kicked out with his hind legs, trying to fight his way up. His lungs were screaming for air. He could see his paws churning in front of his muzzle. But they were not his own tabby paws; they were pale and wide, their fur thick and bunched at the claws. I'm

seeing through Lionpaw's eyes !

Jaypaw drove the images out of his head and knew he was back in the medicine den, surrounded by the scent of leaves and with the hollow empty and silent outside. Where was Lionpaw right now? The race on Windclan territory!

Like lightning, Jaypaw shot out of the medicine den and pelted into the forest, every sense alive as he wove through the undergrowth like a snake. He had to get to Lionpaw before this thing—whatever it was—happened. Jaypaw dashed along the slope toward the Windclan border, remembering the stench of badger from his vision. There was an old badger set near the border, taken over from rabbits a season ago. His mother had described it to him. She had helped chase a badger from it long ago, soon after the four Clans came to the lake.

He dug his claws harder into the grass and pushed himself on. Fresh scents rolled in from the lake, but he focused on the smell of badger, searching it out as he raced onto the planes. His instincts and senses were not enough to guide him quickly through this strange territory with the wind whipping scents in every direction. He skidded to a halt, sniffing desperately, and began to feel his way with his whiskers. StarClan, let me see now! Please! I have to find Lionpaw! Suddenly he tasted the rank stench of badger. It was old and laced with the smell of fox. He gazed around blindly, wondering where Lionpaw was. Then he heard paw steps speeding over the leaf-strewn forest floor ahead. He could smell Lionpaw. Then Breezepaw. Their excitement singed his pelt. With a jolt of terror, Jaypaw realized that the two apprentices were racing toward the badger stench. The place where the ground was not safe, where the earth would swallow them up . . .

"No!" His wail rang through the trees. He pelted forward, breathless with fear. Then shock pierced him and he skidded to a halt. There was no sound of paw steps. The forest was deadly silent.

"Lionpaw!" Jaypaw shot forward. He stumbled as the earth became rock beneath his paws. The sun was suddenly hot on his back. A clearing, ringed with trees. Boulders reared up before him. His fur stood on end as muffled mews sounded from above.

"Help!" Breezepaw's frantic mew reached his ears.

"StarClan, save me!" Lionpaw wailed soon after.

Feeling his way frantically, Jaypaw clambered up the rocks. Where had they fallen in? Was he near? The ground was still rock beneath his paws. It flattened, then sloped smoothly away in front of him. He began to slide forward. Blood roared in his ears. What if I fall in too? The vision played in his mind again—earth choking his ears, his eyes, his lungs screaming for air. He unsheathed his claws. They scraped over the stone as he half crept, half slithered downward. Suddenly his front paws touched sand and sank. Jaypaw sprang backward, clinging to the rock with his hind paws. Then the sand moved; he felt it quivering beneath his forepaws as though something squirmed beneath it. They're down there!

Gripping with his hind claws, he squatted down and began to dig, scooping out earth as fast as he could. "Help!" he wailed, hoping some cat would hear. "Over here!" His hind claws lost their grip and he slid forward, his forepaws sinking into the sand. "StarClan help me!" He reared backward, his muscles screaming with the effort. He couldn't give up now. He slithered forward again and kept digging, his hind paws trembling with the effort of keeping him out of the sinking ground. Soil pressed up against his chest and chin. Terror gripped his whole body. The vision was so strong in his mind he could feel soil in his throat and see nothing but earth. Suddenly his paws brushed against fur. With a rush of hope, he hooked his claws into it and heaved with all his strength. The fur wriggled and fought in his grip, struggling to push upward until Jaypaw could scrabble far enough back to drag the body out of the soil.

Spluttering and gasping, Lionpaw slithered away from the patch of soft earth and collapsed on the rock. Jaypaw plunged his paws back into the soil. Breezepaw was still down there.

"What's going on?" Crowfeather's shocked cry sounded behind him.

Without stopping Jaypaw screeched at the WindClan warrior, "The den collapsed. Lionpaw and Breezepaw fell in!"

Crowfeather was at his side in an instant, sending sandy soil flying

in his desperation to save his son. Claws scrabbled up the boulders behind them.

"Breezepaw?" Nightcloud's horrified gasp sounded close by

"He's still buried!" Crowfeather panted.

Immediately the Windclan she-cat pressed in beside Jaypaw and began digging. "Oh, my precious kit!"

Then Jaypaw felt another movement in the earth beneath his claws. "I can feel him!"

Crowfeather burrowed his paws toward Jaypaw's and lunged down. A growl of effort rose in his throat as he heaved his son out from the suffocating earth. Jaypaw felt soil spray his face and sting his eyes as Breezepaw's body was dragged free. He listened closely for the apprentice's breathing. It had stopped.

"Fetch Leafpool!" he shrieked.

"I'm here!" Leafpool's voice came as a rush of warm air to Jaypaw's ears.

"Can you save them?" he begged. "I came here as fast as I could, but —"

"Lionpaw is breathing," Leafpool told him. "I've cleared the soil from his throat."

Jaypaw felt Breezepaw stir, and for a moment he thought the WindClan apprentice had recovered. Then he realized that Leafpool was wrenching open his jaws.

"Your paws are smallest," she told Jaypaw. "Reach into his mouth and clear as much dirt as you can."

Jaypaw sheathed his claws. Then, forcing himself to stop trembling, he reached delicately into Breezepaw's mouth. He could hear Crowfeather's heart pounding. Nightcloud was quivering in terror behind him. Leafpool's concentration was the only calmness he felt around him, and he clung to it as he scooped the earth from the

back of Breezepaw's throat.

Suddenly Breezepaw coughed and his body writhed as he spat up earth from his stomach and lungs.

"Will he be all right?" Nightcloud whispered.

"Yes, he will," Leafpool promised.

"Thank you, Leafpool," Crowfeather murmured.

"I would give my last drop of blood to save your kit," Leafpool meowed softly to Crowfeather. "You know that." Jaypaw flinched at the tension between them, pricking the air like rain.

"Our kit was lucky that Jaypaw was here." Nightcloud's comment was edged with sharpness.

"Jaypaw?" Lionpaw croaked.

Jaypaw spun around and crouched beside his brother. "That was close, even for you," he mewed.

Lionpaw's breathing was labored but steady. "I thought I was going to join StarClan."

Leafpool's whiskers brushed Jaypaw's cheek. "They were lucky you were here."

"I nearly wasn't fast enough," he replied.

"But you made it to them in time," she pointed out. "You were brave to try to get them out on your own." She flicked his shoulder with her tail. "Come on, let's get them back to the hollow." Finally with a moment alone to his thoughts, Jaypaw thought about the vision. Was Starclan capable of giving him such a clear representation of Lionpaw? They would have to, to show that future.

Jaypaw held out his paw so that Lionpaw could lick the poppy seeds from his pad. Lionpaw lapped them up gratefully. He was still trembling, even though he was safely in Jaypaw's nest, curled beside Breezepaw. Lionpaw had managed to stagger back to the

ThunderClan camp on his own paws. Leafpool and Jaypaw stood against him on either side to take some of his weight.

Nightcloud had carried Breezepaw like a kit. His hind legs had dragged over the forest floor, but he was too exhausted by shock to complain. Crowfeather had padded beside his mate the whole way, offering to help, but Nightcloud kept hold of her kit as though she might lose him again at any moment. Now she lay curled around him, warming his quivering body, her breath falling and rising in time with his.

"Try to persuade them to sleep," Leafpool told Jaypaw. "I'll go and tell the others they're all right." Firestar stood with Brackenfur and Crowfeather outside. The Windclan tom was gripped with anxiety. Hollypaw and Heatherpaw were back to. The sparring must have finished. The brambles swished as the medicine cat padded out of the den.

"I'll make sure they sleep," Nightcloud meowed. Jaypaw heard the swish of her tail as she swept it rhythmically over the earth-powdered pelts of the two apprentices.

"You were so brilliant." Hollypaw's breath tickled his ear. Her comment made his ears hot with embarrassment. Why did she have to treat him like a hero? Crowfeather had acted the same way as they'd padded home through the forest.

"You behaved like a warrior," the WindClan cat had told him.

But Jaypaw did not feel like a warrior. If he had run faster he would have been able to warn Lionpaw. If only his blindness had not slowed him down.

"Lionpaw and Breezepaw wouldn't have been hurt if I'd gotten there sooner," he mewed to Hollypaw.

"But how did you find them at all?" He felt her stare burning his pelt. "They were racing across the whole territory. They could have been anywhere."

Jaypaw hesitated. "I had a vision," he confessed. "I saw what was

going to happen." Panic swept through him as he remembered the sensation of choking, the taste of soil in his mouth, and the sight of paws churning desperately in front of his muzzle. "When I saw the color of the paws, I realized they weren't mine, but Lionpaw's."

"Saw?" Hollypaw's gasp made Jaypaw jump. "You saw his paws?"

"Shhh!" Suddenly he wished he hadn't told her anything. If StarClan thought he was trying to show off, they might take his one chance at sight away. Jaypaw tried to make his sister understand. "Sometimes I can see in dreams and visions," he whispered. "It's hard to explain how. It's . . ." He paused, groping for words. "It's just different."

So many questions flew through her mind, but in a moment they cleared and a purr rumbled in her throat. "StarClan must have given you this gift for a reason. I knew you'd make a great medicine cat." She brushed her cheek along his, then padded out through the brambles.

Jaypaw sighed. He was glad Hollypaw hadn't asked any difficult questions, but was this how it was going to be from now on? A separate life, beyond the understanding of his Clanmates? With their every heartbeat depending on him?

"Jaypaw!" Brambleclaw called through the brambles. "Come down to the lake for the end of the Gathering."

"Firestar's going to be announcing the winners!" Heatherpaw added excitedly.

Jaypaw curled his lip. The last thing he wanted to do was to watch the other apprentices celebrate their warrior skills. He pricked his ears toward Lionpaw and Breezepaw. Nightcloud had done as she promised, and both apprentices were sleeping deeply. He pushed his way out of the den.

"Who's going to watch Lionpaw and Breezepaw?" he asked, looking for an excuse to stay in the camp.

"I will," Leafpool told him.

"Come on, Jaypaw," Hollypaw begged. "It'll be fun."

Reluctantly, Jaypaw followed his Clanmates as they trekked down to the slopes beside the lake. Crowfeather and Heatherpaw went to join WindClan, and Firestar headed off to speak with the other leaders by the lakeshore.

Brambleclaw sat down to wait on the hillside, and Jaypaw sat beside him with Squirrelflight and Hollypaw.

"I've not seen the Clans so relaxed since the Great Journey," Brambleclaw observed.

Squirrelflight's happiness warmed the air around her. "Even ShadowClan seems content."

"But Blackstar is staring at everyone, proud as a blackbird, as if his apprentices won every contest," Hollypaw chipped in.

"Clans of trees, hills, and streams!" Jaypaw heard his leader's call. The cats fell silent, and Jaypaw sensed their gazes turn toward the ThunderClan leader like the sun shifting in the sky.

"All our apprentices did well today," Firestar declared. "They hunted and fought like true warriors!" Jubilant mews rose from all the Clans. "Thunderclan's apprentice Hollypaw won the sparring contest, although Heatherpaw, Oakpaw, and Pebblepaw all demonstrated great skill and strength!"

"Harepaw won the hunting contest!" Onestar cut in. "Even being out of his element, he put up a fight against Pouncepaw, Cinderpaw, and Owlpaw, and came out triumphant!"

Leopardstar smiled as the cheering died back down. "Dapplepaw did the best in the mock invasion, coming up with excellent strategies to fend off attackers larger and stronger than her. However I am told she worked quite well with the other apprentices in the event, Antpaw, Ivypaw, Poppypaw, and Honeypaw."

"And Scorchpaw ultimately beat Minnowpaw in the race across Windclan's territory." Blackstar finished.

"That's not fair!" Scorchpaw snarled, the ShadowClan apprentices bunched around him muttering in agreement. "You make it sound like I had the easiest job! I was racing Lionpaw and Breezepaw too, and they didn't even come back!"

"Hush!" Snowbird silenced him. "They almost died!"

Blackstar nodded to the heated apprentice, "It's all right; we all know you did a good job. You shall have first pick of the prey when we get home."

Leopardstar lifted her voice. "Dapplepaw will eat the best fish tonight.."

"Harepaw shall have the fattest rabbit," Onestar called.

Jaypaw's muzzle sank to his chest. He didn't want to hear how well every other apprentice had done.

"And from ThunderClan," Firestar announced, "Hollypaw may choose first prey from the pile. She fought excellently for such a new apprentice."

Jaypaw felt pride surge in his sister's pelt, and hated the jealousy that throbbed in his paws.

Thornclaw padded over to her, and Jaypaw barely recognized him. His thoughts weren't nearly as quick as usual. He seemed calm, and focused. "You really did." The old warrior let out a breath, and Jaypaw could feel it rustle his fur. "You're a very skilled apprentice, and I have no doubt you will make a great warrior. I underestimated you unfairly, and I am sorry about that."

"N-no problem." Hollypaw replied, completely dumbfounded by her mentor's new attitude.

Jaypaw didn't know how to comment, but he had to say something. "Well done," he mumbled. "I'd better get back and see if Leafpool needs help."

"Please stay," Hollypaw mewed.

Jaypaw shook his head and turned away. He began to climb the slope toward the tree line. Then Onestar's voice sounded from below.

"There is one apprentice who deserves a special mention above all the others today." Jaypaw kept on walking. "Jaypaw." The gray tabby stopped. "This young ThunderClan apprentice has earned the gratitude of every cat for his courage and quick thinking today."

Jaypaw felt the curious gaze of all the Clans ruffle his pelt. He turned self-consciously to face them.

Firestar joined in. "He saved two apprentices. They nearly suffocated when an old badger set collapsed beneath them. Jaypaw found them in time and dug them out."

Shocked mews turned into cheers. They were cheering for him! Hollypaw's and Squirrelflight's pelts suddenly brushed against his flanks. Hollypaw pressed her nose against his cheek. "You're a hero." Could blind cats be heroes?

"This has been a good Gathering," Firestar meowed as the cheering died down. "It has reminded me of the Great Journey. A lot has changed, but we are still true warriors!"

Chapter 12

"I name you Lionclaw, warrior of DarkClan!" Lionpaw flexed his claws as Heatherpaw called down to him from the highest ledge in the cave. Moonlight, streaming through the gap in the roof, fell silver on her pelt. She leaped down and touched her nose to his. "Congratulations." Lionpaw's fur tingled. "But first"—Heatherpaw's blue eyes flashed in the half- light—"you have to prove yourself a warrior by outrunning me."

"That's not fair!" Lionpaw flicked his tail. "WindClan cats are really fast; everyone knows that."

"You tried to compete against Breezepaw in the race."

"That's different!" Lionpaw licked his chest fur in embarrassment. He had only chosen the race because he wanted to beat Breezepaw at something.

"Well if you want to be a DarkClan warrior, you've got to be as fast as me."

"In that case"—Lionpaw launched himself at her, stretching his paws around her to soften her fall, but pinning her to the ground —"you've got to prove you're as strong as me!"

"Hey! That's cheating! You didn't warn me!" she mewed.

"The leader of DarkClan must be prepared for anything." Lionpaw.

"Like this?" She slithered from his grasp, darted behind him as fast as a blink, and grabbed his tail gently but firmly between her teeth.

"Hey!" he yelped, trying to reach around and swipe her away. She dodged and he found himself swiping at thin air, his tail still held firm. He twisted the other way, trying to reach her, but she dodged again. He could hear a rumbling in her throat and her whiskers were twitching.

She let go. "You looked so funny flapping your paws around! Like a fledgling just out of the nest!"

Lionpaw stared at her, happiness welling in his chest. Just the sight of her blue eyes and soft fur made warmth surge beneath his pelt. "I wish you were in ThunderClan."

She shuddered. "Under all those trees and closed in by stone walls? No, thanks! Besides," she went on, "we don't need to live in the same Clan when we've got this cave all to ourselves." Lionpaw. She reached out a paw and batted something from the fur behind his ear. "Just a burr." She flicked it onto the ground.

"Thanks."

"Lionpaw!" Cinderpaw's mew jerked the golden tom awake and he found himself back in his den. I was dreaming about that night with Heatherpaw . He realized as he rubbed his eye with his paw. The sunlight struck him through the den entrance, reminding his scratchy eyes of how late he's stayed out the previous night. But they'd been meeting here for half a moon now, and none of his Clanmates suspected a thing. Not even his nosy sister.

"Wake up sleepyhead!" The meow came again, teasingly this time. "The dawn patrol is coming back. You really slept in!" Lionpaw pushed himself with a ground and glanced longingly at his nest, his paws as heavy as stones, but Cinderpaw was already brushing past him, leading the way out of the den. He padded after her, leaving Honeypaw stretching in her nest.

Outside Berrynose was strutting about like he'd become clan leader as Birchfall, Thornclaw, Hollypaw, and Ashfur came into camp behind him. Birds twittered noisily at the top of the ravine. Lionpaw stifled a yawn and stretched.

"Oh Berrynose!" A silvery voice sounded from behind Lionpaw, soon followed by the golden pelt of Honeypaw racing by him. "How was it, leading a patrol of your own?"

The cream tom flipped his head around so he could look down at Honeypaw. "It was no trouble. The scent along Windclan's border

was lighter than its been in a while. And no cat dared to cross with me there."

Lionpaw could feel a growl rising in his throat and he noticed with amazement that Hollypaw and her mentor seemed to be echoing his sentiment in their expressions. He was right. No one liked Berrynose!

"Anything to report?" Firestar called down from Highledge.

"Windclan is trying to stir up trouble like usual." Berrynose reported, laying his tail on Honeypaw's flank as he stepped forward. "They were hunting in the forest."

"In our forest?" Firestar leaped down from the ledge.

Lionpaw was ready to defend his Clan's prey from any marauding WindClan cats, but what if one of those cats was Heatherpaw? What would happen if it really did come to a fight between him and his friend?

The ThunderClan leader had reached Berrynose, flanked by Sandstorm and Brackenfur. He was lashing his tail, clearly disturbed by the news.

"They haven't crossed the border," Birchfall explained.

The tip of Ashfur's tail twitched. "They almost did."

Brambleclaw emerged from the warriors' den. "What's going on?"

"Two WindClan apprentices near our border," Birchfall meowed. "They were chasing a squirrel and nearly crossed the stream by mistake."

"They should have known better," Thornclaw growled. "Unless they're so used to crossing the stream by mistake they don't notice anymore."

"There was no scent of WindClan in our territory," Birchfall reminded him hesitantly.

"But why is WindClan chasing squirrels?" Firestar demanded. "They hunt rabbit."

"Not anymore." Hollypaw kneaded the ground."Breezepaw said that all the WindClan apprentices are being trained to hunt in woodland now."

Brackenfur stiffened. "We must re-mark the borders." he meowed.

"We've already done that," Ashfur told him.

Sandstorm sat down. "Let's not make a big thing about this. It was just two young cats—"

Thornclaw cut her off. "Hunting our prey!"

"We should be on our guard," Brackenfur advised. "It needs to be reported at the next Gathering."

Firestar plucked at the ground. "Did any WindClan cats cross the border?"

"No," Birchfall replied.

"And there was definitely no scent of WindClan cats on our side of the stream?" Firestar pressed.

"None." Berrynose cut in.

Thornclaw snorted. "The rain might have washed it clean."

"Or they've never crossed the border," Firestar pointed out. "I can't tell WindClan what to hunt on their own territory." He turned away. "We'll leave it for now and see what happens."

The clan broke up into groups, murmuring intently to each other with a mix of expressions. Even if Firestar was letting it be for now, so many of his clanmates were getting angry with Windclan. If nothing else, someone would ask him what he thought about the situation. What would he say? What could he say? Lionpaw shifted his paws, uncertain what to think about his leader's decision. If Firestar ignored every problem, ThunderClan might look weak, and

he knew the clan had to stay strong. He even wanted to practice his skills. Fighting for his clan was the best way to show his loyalty, and some cats like Breezepaw could stand to have their butts kicked in battle. But the thought of fighting WindClan made his stomach churn. How could he go on meeting Heatherpaw if their Clans were at war?

Suddenly, a breeze ruffled his fur and a voice murmured in his ear. Be honest, Lionpaw. Don't be afraid of the things you desire. You know what you think. Lionpaw's belly twisted with guilt, but this voice was right. He knew exactly what he thought. A battle with WindClan was the last thing he wanted. They should leave Windclan alone.

Apparently deciding the meeting was over, Ashfur made his way over to his apprentice, pulling him from his thoughts.

"Despite the...tension, on the patrol. It did give Birchfall, Thornclaw, and I time to talk things over." Ashfur began. "We've decided to bring you, Cinderpaw, and Hollypaw out for a group training session today." The speckled warrior's fur ripped as he stared at his apprentice. "What's wrong with you?"

Blinking several times, Lionpaw looked up at him, realizing he had been slowly sliding forward as his mentor spoke. Quickly he pushed himself back up into a seated position. "I just..." He fumbled around for an excuse, trying to think of something that didn't involve tunnels, or going out of camp at all actually. "I didn't sleep well last night. I-I had a bad dream."

"A bad dream? Oh I'm sorry." Ashfur's voice stayed firm as ever, a light of sarcasm touching it for these words. "Dreams are a perfectly good reason to not be fit for training. I guess we'll just leave you in camp if you don't think you'll do well. Should I get Leafpool?"

"No!" Lionpaw responded immediately. "Don't bother her with something like this. I-I'll be fine for training." Whatever he felt today, it was a chance to train with Hollypaw and he couldn't fall behind in training. He could do it.

"For StarClan's sake!" Ashfur bounded from the ferns and glared

angrily at Lionpaw. "How did you miss it?" The thrush, which had whisked away from Lionpaw's outstretched paws only moments earlier, perched on a branch above the training hollow and called an alarm before fluttering away into the trees.

Lionpaw hung his head. He should have caught it, but his paws felt like stones. "Sorry." He had managed to get some sleep after playing with Heatherpaw the previous night but it hadn't been much, and he was still exhausted.

"You're lumbering around like a badger today," Ashfur scolded.

"I'm sure every apprentice has missed a squirrel at one time or another." Cinderpaw cut in, trying to ease the situation.

Hollypaw flicked a tail, keeping her piercing gaze fixed on Lionpaw. "But not every apprentice is tired every day even when they sleep in." Her comment came out in a low murmur, as if she was saying it to herself more than anything. Lionpaw's ears grew hot. If his sister found out about Heatherpaw and him he'd never hear the end of it.

"That call probably alerted all the prey around here. Let's try somewhere else and hope we manage to catch something." Ashfur meowed. "We don't want the Clan to go hungry."

"They won't!" Lionpaw snapped. Why couldn't Ashfur give him advice instead of pointing out his mistakes?

Ashfur swung his head around and glared at Lionpaw. "I have tried to make you the best apprentice in your den," he growled, "but lately it's been like training a slug. You only seem to hear half of what I tell you and the things you do hear, you forget. You used to have an instinct for hunting and fighting, but it's gone and I don't know where."

Lionpaw's whiskers trembled. He couldn't deny that he had been distracted lately, but he thought no one had noticed. "I promise I'll try harder."

"You'll have to if you don't want to get left behind in the apprentice den and watch Foxkit and Icekit become warriors before you!"

"I will!" Fear squirmed in Lionpaw's belly. Everything had come so easily before. The idea that he might struggle to keep up filled him with dread.

"Good." Thornclaw's mew came from behind him as he stood beside Birchfall. "Because it's time to assess your progress" Cinderpaw and Hollypaw came to flank him as Ashfur sat down by the other mentors.

Lionpaw squared his shoulders. "Okay."

Birchfall dipped his head. "We want you to go out hunting. Catch as much prey as you can."

"For this task," Ashfur continued, "You will be allowed to work together, but we will be judging you individually so if one of you does not pull your weight...you should not expect to get away with it."

Hollypaw seemed to be pulsing with excitement. "An assessment already?

"Poppypaw and Honeypaw were assessed a few days ago." Cinderpaw responded. "I would have gone with them but Birchfall wanted to take me battle training instead since I was hunting on competition day."

"Great!" Her eyes glowed as she spoke. "Well, not that you didn't get assessed with your sisters, I'm just happy we have this opportunity to demonstrate our skills." Hollypaw started training late but, especially since the competition, it seemed like even she was doing better than him.

Thornclaw flicked his tail. "Don't forget we'll be watching, out of sight."

"Good luck!" Birchfall called as they padded away. Nerves fluttered in Lionpaw's belly. What if he failed?

"I can't wait to show them what we're made of!" Cinderpaw glanced at the two apprentices beside her with hesitant excitement. "I'm really glad to have you two with me for this." Her voice dipped

lower as she leaned towards Hollypaw's ear. "In all honesty, I was kind of worried when Birchfall decided not to bring me along with Honeypaw and Poppypaw. I thought I might be falling behind..."

"I'm sure you're not, Cinderpaw." His sister's green eyes shone with compassion. "Birchfall was probably just worried about spending too much time on hunting when we might have a battle with Windclan soon." Was she right? Most of the clan seemed to be preparing for it, but they still hadn't been doing anything other than angering each other. A Thunderclan patrol did save them when they were attacked by dogs. Would Windclan really attack after something like that? "And I know we'll do our absolute best to prove our worth as warriors," Hollypaw vowed, flashing a pointed glance at Lionpaw. She knows something's up.

Cinderpaw nodded with a renewed smile and shot away, leaving Lionpaw and Hollypaw to hurry after her.

"Where should-we hunt?" Lionpaw asked through stilted breaths. He could feel his muscles burning much earlier than they usually did. Was being out at night really that bad?

"Let's try hunting by the stream near the ShadowClan border," Cinderpaw announced. "There's always prey there."

"It's a bit open, isn't it?" Hollypaw mewed.

"I'm good at jumping," Cinderpaw reminded her. "Even in the open, the prey won't see me coming till it's too late."

"I think I'll stick to the undergrowth," Hollypaw decided. "I prefer stalking my prey. But if you need some help with prey over there I'd be happy to scare it into your paws." His sister glanced back at Lionpaw. "What about you? "

"I'm with you," he announced. "Undergrowth is easier. But once I've caught a few quick pieces, I'm going to get a squirrel."

"Come on, then!" Cinderpaw picked up the pace, racing through the undergrowth.

Hollypaw and Lionpaw sped after her, leaves fluttering in their

wake. As they neared the stream, Cinderpaw veered away toward the bank. Hollypaw headed for a small dip where the ferns grew thickly, and Lionpaw bounded towards a tree in between them that often had prey scurrying by its roots.

Is Ashfur watching me already? He wondered as he drew himself forward, one slow paw step at a time. He focused his senses on the foliage ahead, opening his mouth slightly to taste the breeze. Rabbit scent hung stale in the air, but the smell of mouse was fresh. Good! He halted and pricked his ears. The grass was shivering up ahead. Narrowing his eyes he peered through the lush stalks and saw a small brown shape dart across over the leafy earth. It began rooting among the leaf litter. He crept closer. The mouse stiffened.

Mouse dung! His tail had brushed against a leaf. The mouse glanced around. Don't move! Lionpaw held her breath and pressed his tail to the ground. The mouse began rummaging again. Good! It's busy looking for food . Moving as slowly as a snail, Lionpaw drew himself forward. I have to focus! The mouse went on rummaging. One more paw step!

A twig cracked beneath his paw. The mouse darted away. Lionpaw sprang and shot out his forepaws, catching the mouse in his claws before it had time to escape. One quick nip to the back of the neck and it was dead. Heart pounding, he carried it to the roots of a beech and buried it quickly before turning back for his next catch.

Before long he had caught a shrew as well, but he missed a chance at another mouse. As he safely buried the last of his catch beneath the beech, he saw gray fur flash among the brambles at the top of the slope. How long had Ashfur been watching him? He hoped his mentor didn't think he had done too badly. Ferns rustled and Cinderpaw exploded from the woods behind him.

"I've caught four water voles," the gray she-cat declared. "Let's try for a squirrel!"

"Alright," Hollypaw replied as she too came to join them, placing a fat pheasant in front of them. "But keep quiet. You don't want to scare the prey away."

"Sorry." Cinderpaw flicked her tail. "Are you still hunting?"

"I think I've got enough," Hollypaw conceded.

"Can I bury my prey with your's?" Cinderpaw turned to Lionpaw, indicating the hole he just covered.

"Won't they get mixed up?"

"Birchfall already knows what I caught."

"Have you spoken to him?" Hollypaw looked as surprised as Lionpaw felt. Mentors didn't usually speak to their apprentices once an assessment started.

"Of course not," Cinderpaw assured her. "But I could see him watching the whole time. He may blend in well but it doesn't matter when he stomps like a badger." She purred with amusement.

"Well if we want to catch a squirrel, there are usually some upstream," Hollypaw suggested.

Lionpaw looked at his meager catch in comparison with Cinderpaw's and Hollypaw's. "I think I'll climb the Sky Oak," He announced.

"No way!" Cinderpaw looked amazed, giving Lionpaw a small kernel of pride. "That's one of the biggest trees in the forest!"

"There'll be squirrels in other trees," Hollypaw cautioned.

"I'm going to climb the Sky Oak!" Lionpaw insisted. He couldn't fail this assessment. If he couldn't last just because he was tired, he might not be able to meet with Heatherpaw anymore. "I've been training long enough. I want Ashfur to see how good I am now."

"Wow," Cinderpaw breathed, "that's brave!"

"Come on." Lionpaw darted among the trees. Cinderpaw, kicking up leaves, scooted after him. Hollypaw glanced once more at the beech they were leaving and raced after them.

At the base of the Sky Oak, Lionpaw gazed up through the branches. The trunk seemed to stretch up forever, the blue sky glinting between the bright green leaves. His tail trembled slightly but he wouldn't let any other part of him show the trepidation he had for the task he was taking on.

"You're scared," Cinderpaw teased.

Hollypaw dug her claws into the earth, locking her gaze firmly on her brother "Why not just catch a few more mice instead?" she suggested. "There'll be plenty around here."

The fur along Lionpaw's spine pricked up like a hedgehog. Hollypaw didn't think he could do it! "No. I'm going to catch a squirrel," he muttered determinedly. He sprang up and stretched out his forelegs to grip the wide trunk with his claws. Dragging himself upward, he managed to clamber onto the lowest branch. "There!" he called. "Easy." He looked up, searching for his next perch. But suddenly he heard paw steps pounding towards them.

"Lionpaw!" Birchfall hurtled out of the trees. He was panting and his eyes were wide with alarm. "Get down!"

Ashfur skidded after him. "Leave him alone!" he snapped at Birchfall. "If he wants to do it, let him!"

Thornclaw padded out from the trees. "I thought we weren't meant to help—" He stopped when he spotted Lionpaw scrambling up to the next branch.

"I really think you should tell him to come down," Birchfall advised.

"Are you just trying to stop my apprentice from performing well?" Ashfur flattened his ears. Ashfur is actually arguing for me? He thinks I can do it?

"He's still young," Birchfall argued. "I wouldn't have let Cinderpaw do it at his age."

"Lionpaw is only a moon younger, and he's had some climbing experience with me." Ashfur shot back. "If my apprentice wants to test himself, I see no reason for you to butt in on it and stop him."

"Look, it's easy!" Lionpaw called. The branches were close together now and he was leaping nimbly upward.

"Not too high," Thornclaw cautioned. Even he seemed to be worrying, despite his more even tone. Leaves rustled just above him. A squirrel was scrambling up the tree.

"Look!" Cinderpaw called excitedly. "There's one!"

Lionpaw darted after it. He could see leaves shivering far above as the squirrel kept climbing, staying just a few tail-lengths ahead of him, almost as if it were enticing him upward.

Suddenly, the squirrel leaped out of the Sky Oak and landed in the tree next to it, sending twigs showering down. Lionpaw froze. What now? He could feel his tail bushing up as he looked across the chasm-like distance between the trees.

"Good try. You may as well come down," Thornclaw called.

The golden tom's breath quickened and became ragged. He wanted to prove himself but not like this. "I can't!" Lionpaw's mew came out as a squeak, to his dismay. "I'm stuck!"

Ashfur sighed. "Well what are we going to do now?"

"I could go up after him," Birchfall offered. Their voices sounded far off through the rustle of the leaves in the branches around him.

"He's not going to get down by himself in that state," Thornclaw agreed.

"I'll fetch him!" mewed Cinderpaw.

"Wait!" Hollypaw yelped as the gray apprentice began to scramble up the tree trunk.

"Get down at once!" Thornclaw hissed.

Cinderpaw paused on the lowest branch. "But I can see an easy route to get him down," she argued. Thornclaw exchanged worried glances with Birchfall.

"I'll go slowly," Cinderpaw promised when they didn't say anything. "And if I feel like I'm getting too high, I'll stop."

Birchfall nodded. "Okay, but be careful. I don't want you getting stuck too."

Cautiously, Cinderpaw began to climb the tree, taking her time between jumps, making sure that she only reached up a little at a time. Lionpaw watched, his mouth dry. She'll be all right, she told herself again and again. He couldn't bare to look directly at the ground. Somehow each time the branch would sway beneath him so much that it was a wonder it didn't crack. His heart would turn from fluttering to pumping wildly. He kept his eyes fixed on Cindererpaw, even knowing they were, at this point, large, round, and frightened.

"She's nearly reached him," Thornclaw reported.

Cinderpaw was only a few branches away now. "It's okay, Lionpaw," Cinderpaw called up to him. "There's nothing to be frightened of. I'm going to get you down."

And just like that she was there. The gray apprentice was perched on the branch right next to him, dipping her head encouragingly. Carefully she guided him to one branch after another, keeping her tail not far from him in case anything went wrong. Lionpaw found his breath steadying to the rhythm of his friend's as they climbed down.

"That's it," Cinderpaw mewed. "The next branch is really close. Just make sure you grip with your claws and you'll be fine." The blue-eyed she cat had come onto the same branch as him now that they were thicker. Her fur brushed his as they lined up for each new uneasy jump. We're going to make it!

Suddenly, a bird shrieked and flapped out of the tree just below them. Lionpaw wailed in shock and slipped from the branch. Quick as a flash, Cinderpaw lunged forward and reached for him. She caught him and hauled him back onto the branch, her hind legs scrabbling for a hold. Lionpaw frantically grabbed at the branch and clung to the bark, his tail lashing in panic. I could have fallen.

Thank Starclan!

Then he saw Cinderpaw wobble. The gray tabby's hind paws were slipping over the back of the branch. Her forepaws churned desperately at the air. With a yelp she slid over the edge and fell. Lionpaw stared in horror as Cinderpaw dropped through the leaves like a stone and landed with a sickening thud.

"No!" Birchfall's mew cracked as he darted forward. "Cinderpaw? Cinderpaw!" He crouched over the limp body lying awkwardly on the ground.

"Get Leafpool!" Thornclaw hissed in Hollypaw's ear. Hollypaw glanced once more at her friend's twisted body before hurtling away through the trees.

Lionpaw gazed down at Cinderpaw for only a moment before he rushed down the rest of the branches. Cinderpaw can't be dead! She mustn't be dead! The world around him began to blur as if he was back up in the tree.

"We'll need...carry her." Ashfur's words sounded muffled in his ears but soon the gray mass beneath him began to move as Birchfall and Ashfur lifted her onto Thornclaw's back. A small squeak escaped Cinderpaw's lips.

Lionpaw rushed forward in front of the warriors. "Stop! You're hurting her!"

"We have to get her to Leafpool, Lionpaw."

The three warriors pushed passed him and Lionpaw was left to trail behind as they began the slow journey back to camp. Cinderpaw's tail was dragging along through the sticks and rocks behind them as her twisted form lay on Thornclaw. Without a word, Lionpaw moved forward and picked up her tail, bowing his head so it could rest level with the rest of her as they trudged home.

Please get better Cinderpaw. I'm sorry.

Chapter 13

Jaypaw stiffened. Paws were pounding toward the camp. He tasted the air. Hollypaw's fear-scent hit the back of his throat. He pushed through the trailing brambles that screened the den from the rest of the camp.

Hollypaw exploded into the camp. "Cinderpaw's fallen out of the Sky Oak!"

Jaypaw gasped. "I'll fetch Leafpool!" He pelted for the nursery where she was checking on the kits.

But Leafpool was already racing out. "Cinderpaw?"

Jaypaw skidded to a halt, narrowly avoiding her. She stopped, trembling, in the middle of the clearing. A flood of terrorized thoughts pulsed from her like blood from a wound. Not again! Her silent plea sliced into Jaypaw's thoughts, as clear as if she'd cried out loud.

"You have to come at once!" Hollypaw wailed.

"What's happened?" Firestar pounded across the clearing. Paw steps sounded on every side as the Clan came running to see what was wrong.

"Cinderpaw was helping Lionpaw down the Sky Oak and she fell!" Hollypaw's words came in great gulps of air.

"How bad is she?" Honeypaw's frantic mew came from the apprentice den, and Jaypaw could scent Poppypaw with equal fear beside her.

Hollypaw heaved, trying to keep herself composed. "I don't know! I just left to get help." I should have checked first! What was I thinking? Jaypaw shook his head. No, no matter what Hollypaw might think, getting the medicine cats there was the first priority.

Poppypaw and Honeypaw could have their solace when she was safe in camp.

"Leafpool, meet them on the way here!" Firestar ordered.

Come on! Jaypaw willed his mentor to move, but she seemed rooted to the spot, her terror blocking out every other thought. "What herbs will we need?" he prompted, hoping he could get them himself. He could feel Hollypaw trembling behind him.

"Poppy seeds?" he pressed when Leafpool didn't answer.

Just as panic threatened to overwhelm him as well, Leafpool snapped out of her daze. He felt her mind clear, like rain lifting. "Poppy seeds, yes. Rushes and cobweb to bind any broken legs, and thyme for the shock."

"I'll fetch them," Jaypaw offered.

"Please hurry!" Hollypaw begged.

"Who's with her?" Leafpool demanded.

"Lionpaw, Thornclaw, Birchfall, and Ashfur ."

"Good. They should be able to carry her fine. But we should meet them halfway. It may be dangerous to move her."

Jaypaw pushed past Millie and Graystripe and raced to the medicine den, his tail bristling. He barged past Spiderleg standing, fur spiked, in the entrance and darted to the herb storeroom. Lapping up several poppy seeds, he tucked them safely under his tongue, then grabbed a sprig of thyme and quickly wrapped it up in a fat wad of cobweb along with a pawful of rushes. He picked the bundle up in his jaws and hurtled back into the clearing.

"Got everything?" Leafpool asked.

Jaypaw nodded.

"Hurry!" Hollypaw called. She led them out of the camp in a run. The forest floor felt soft beneath Jaypaw's pads. Hollypaw plunged

up the slope, Leafpool on her heels. Jaypaw ran after them, every sense alert, dodging the trees only by a whisker. A bramble tugged at his paw and he stumbled forward, dropping his bundle.

"Here, I'll carry that!" Leafpool turned and swiftly picked up the rushes before speeding away again. Jaypaw hurried after her, keeping close, following her paw steps as she weaved through the forest.

"I see them!" Hollypaw called. Her paws beat faster against the ground. "Watch out for the fallen tree!" she warned. Her paw steps fell silent as she leaped over the log and landed with a thump on the other side. Leafpool followed her. Jaypaw didn't hesitate. Tensing, he leaped as high as he could, praying he had timed it right. He felt the rotting bark of the fallen tree brush his paws as he sailed over and landed lightly on the ground beyond.

"Over here!" Hollypaw had reached the others. Jaypaw felt Birchfall's panicked thoughts dashing through his mind like lightning. He and Ashfur seemed to be flanking Thornclaw, who held Cinderpaw on his back. Lionpaw was trailing behind them. I'm sorry, I'm sorry. He seemed to keep repeating it in his mind. What was his brother sorry for?

"She's still breathing!" Thornclaw called.

"Good!" Leafpool dropped the bundle. "Now put her down, gently." Jaypaw crouched beside her as she leaned over Cinderpaw. He could hear the injured apprentice's breathing. It was quick and shallow. He touched her flank with his nose. She was as limp as a dead mouse. His belly tightened.

"She's in shock!" Leafpool pronounced. "Lick her chest while I give her the thyme."

Jaypaw spat out the poppy seeds and began to lick Cinderpaw. Her heart beat rapidly beneath his tongue. He smelled the herbs as Leafpool tore open the bundle and chewed the leaves into a pulp that she could drip into Cinderpaw's mouth.

"Is she going to die?" Birchfall's mew trembled.

"I won't let her," Leafpool snapped.

The medicine cat moved around to Cinderpaw's other side. "Lick more gently now," she ordered. Jaypaw began to lap Cinderpaw delicately, relieved to feel her heart slowing. He could hear Leafpool sniffing Cinderpaw's body, examining her. Suddenly, the medicine cat stiffened.

"What's wrong?" Jaypaw whispered.

Leafpool backed away as though stung by a wasp.

"What's the matter?" Birchfall surged forward, nearly knocking Jaypaw over.

What had frightened Leafpool so much? Jaypaw stopped licking, and searched her mind. No no no no no no! That single word was filling her mind, threatening to overwhelm her. What could be so bad?

"Sh-she's broken a hind leg," Leafpool gulped.

"We can bind it with the rushes," Jaypaw suggested.

Leafpool didn't reply. Not again!

"She won't die of a broken leg, will she?" Thornclaw spoke up, with a remarkably clear mind given the situation. Still, the stream of anxiety was present.

Leafpool didn't move. Jaypaw focused on her mind, seeing a flash of gray fur standing before her. Cinder- .

"Here!" Jaypaw tugged one of the rushes free. He jabbed it at Leafpool. She jerked and then took it. Jaypaw felt a wave of relief as she laid it beside Cinderpaw's broken leg and took another. He passed her the cobweb, and she carefully began to bind the rushes to Cinderpaw's leg. "We need to secure it until we can get her back to camp,"

Leafpool muttered. "Then I can set the break properly."

When she had finished, Leafpool sat up. "Ashfur, Birchfall, you help Thornclaw carry her back to camp. Make sure her leg moves as little as possible."

Cinderpaw let out a soft moan as Thornclaw, Birchfall, and Ashfur lifted her.

"Careful!" Leafpool gasped.

Jaypaw could hear her paw steps dancing around the warriors, pushing aside brambles as she tried, and failed to push away thoughts of terror.

"Watch those roots! Take her around the fallen tree! Avoid that dip! Hold her more steadily!"

Lionpaw padded over to his siblings, his breath finally slowing but his thoughts still chaotic. Hollypaw pressed against him. She was trembling. "I thought she was dead," she murmured.

"She's going to be okay," Jaypaw reassured her. "She's got a strong heart. And it's only her leg that's broken."

"Only her leg!" Leafpool's sharp mew took him by surprise. "A warrior needs four good legs!"

Hollypaw pressed her muzzle to Jaypaw's ear. "I've never seen her so upset," she whispered.

Jaypaw shook his head. "Me neither." He leaned against Hollypaw with Lionpaw on his other side, letting them guide him through the undergrowth.

He wanted to focus his attention on Leafpool. Amongst the panic seething in the medicine cat's mind, he could pick out one thought. My fault, it's my fault . Why? She hadn't pushed Cinderpaw out of the tree. It was just an accident. Why does Leafpool feel so responsible?

Cinderpaw's fur swished against the sandy floor as the three warriors laid her gently down in the medicine den. Sorreltail and Brackenfur were in the den already, plucking at the ground with

trembling paws.

Poppypaw and Honeypaw fidgeted beside Hollypaw and Lionpaw, breathing in frightened gulps.

"Thank you," Leafpool mewed briskly to the cats in the den. "Leave us now."

"But—" Brackenfur began to protest, but Sorreltail interrupted him softly.

"I'll stay with her."

The brambles rustled as the deputy followed the other toms out.

Jaypaw bent down and licked Cinderpaw between her ears. She was unconscious again. "We'll take care of you," he promised. He felt Hollypaw's gaze on his pelt. "You'd better go too," he advised her. "Firestar's waiting." He could sense the ThunderClan leader's heavy presence outside the den. "He'll want to know what happened."

"You will make her better?" Hollypaw mewed.

"We'll try."

As Hollypaw padded from the den, Leafpool murmured to Sorreltail, "I'll do everything in my power to make her well." Tension laced her mew. Jaypaw knew she was Leafpool's friend before he was born, but this was the first time he'd seen them speak to each other alone.

"I know you will." Sorreltail's voice cracked with grief, but Jaypaw could still hear affection in her mew. "You always put your clan first."

Leafpool didn't reply again, but dipped her head, turning back to her patient. Her thoughts were stilling, as though she was locking them up as she spoke to her old friend.

Sorreltail's breath ruffled Cinderpaw's pelt. "May StarClan protect you," she whispered.

"She will be all right, won't she?" Honeypaw's frightened mew

sounded beside Sorreltail.

"Don't let her die!" Poppypaw sobbed.

"Come on," Sorreltail encouraged them. "Let's go and see Brackenfur. He'll need company." She guided her kits out of the medicine den, leaving Jaypaw alone with Leafpool.

With the other cats gone, Jaypaw could feel Leafpool's anxiety fizzle back up to the surface, the locks bursting as she wondered what she could do about the gray apprentice. Suddenly, Cinderpaw stirred. Leafpool swished her tail over the young cat's flank. "Don't be frightened," she soothed. "You are safely back at camp. You fell from the Sky Oak and you've hurt your leg. But we're going to fix it." The message I hope flared in her mind, but her voice remained calm. "What were you trying to do? Did you think you were a bird? Did you think you could fly?"

Her mew was as gentle as a mother's. Jaypaw had never wondered before if Leafpool felt sad she would never have kits of her own.

Cinderpaw let out a soft moan, then her breathing deepened. She was unconscious once more.

"Come on, Jaypaw," Leafpool mewed, suddenly brisk. "Let's get this leg set. First, we need to take this binding off."

Jaypaw began to help Leafpool to gnaw through the cobweb, releasing the rushes.

"Now, we need fresh rushes." Leafpool darted to the back of the cave before Jaypaw could move and fetched three fresh rushes and another wad of cobweb. "If we place those two there, and hold another one here—"

Jaypaw reached out to help, but felt her paw already pressing the rush gently to Cinderpaw's hind leg while she used her teeth to wrap cobwebs around it. "This should hold it tight."

Jaypaw started to feel as if he wasn't needed. Was Leafpool showing him what to do, or just talking herself through it? "Shall I get some comfrey?" he offered.

"What?" Leafpool sounded distracted. "Yes, yes. Good idea."

Jaypaw collected a mouthful of leaves and began chewing them into a pulp. He could still hear Leafpool fussing over the dressing. "A bit more cobweb here should hold it just right," she murmured.

Cinderpaw twitched and let out a small whine.

"Perhaps we should leave her to rest," he ventured. "There's nothing more we can do for her now."

In an instant he felt Leafpool's hot breath on his face. "There's everything we can do for her!" she hissed.

Alarmed, Jaypaw backed away, ears flattened.

Anger flamed from Leafpool's pelt. "We can't let Cinderpaw lose the use of her leg!"

"I—I—" he stammered.

Leafpool backed off and Jaypaw felt guilt flood her mind. What is wrong with me? I can't do this . "I'm sorry, Jaypaw. I shouldn't have snapped. You've been a great help."

But you didn't let me do anything. Jaypaw bit back the words, wary of antagonizing her again.

Leafpool turned away. "I must go and talk to Sorreltail and Brackenfur." The brambles rustled as she pushed her way through them. Jaypaw stayed where he was. What had gotten into his mentor? He knew she cared deeply for her Clanmates, but he'd never seen her angry that a cat had been hurt before. It was as though healing Cinderpaw was the most important thing she'd ever have to do. Was it because Cinderpaw was her friend's kit?

He checked Cinderpaw's heart, pressing his ear to her chest. It was beating too rapidly, her breathing too quick. He settled down beside her and let his warmth spread into her body. Speeding up his breath to match hers, he closed his eyes.

He was standing at the top of a ravine. Thick woodland crowded

every side, and far below, trees and bushes hid the ground from view. Is this part of StarClan's territory? Fear clutched his heart. Was Cinderpaw dying? Had he been brought here to save her?

A shape caught his eye below. The gray she-cat was leaping from boulder to boulder, down the ravine. She disappeared into the lush greenery.

Jaypaw started to panic. I mustn't let her out of my sight! He scrambled over the edge of the ravine, following the path Cinderpaw had taken, fighting to keep his balance on the tumble of rocks because he was unaccustomed to using sight to guide him. At the bottom, a dense wall of gorse blocked his way. Just in time he spotted the tip of Cinderpaw's tail disappear into it. He raced after her and found an opening in the gorse. He slithered through and found her standing in a sandy clearing at the bottom of the ravine. Bushes and ferns circled it protectively and at the far end, a jagged rock blocked the way out.

"Cinderpaw?" Cautiously, Jaypaw padded toward her, tasting the air. It didn't smell like StarClan territory, but there were definitely some scents that he recognized. A tree stump near the edge of the clearing seemed to smell of Firestar and Graystripe. The bramble bush beside him carried the scents of Dustpelt and Thornclaw.

As he approached, the she-cat turned to look at him. That wasn't Cinderpaw! This was a gray cat like Cinderpaw supposedly was, but Jaypaw had seen this cat before, the night he followed Leafpool to the Moonpool.

"Cinderpelt?" He asked hesitantly.

The she-cat gazed around, wide-eyed, her tail twitching with pleasure. "I haven't been here for such a long time." Her eyes glistened with sadness despite her apparent joy. "I'm glad you could join me here, Jaypaw."

This wasn't ThunderClan territory. It didn't even feel like anywhere near the lake. The wind sounded different as it rustled the leaves in the trees at the top of the ravine. The air tasted warmer, filled with a damp fustiness that Jaypaw had never scented before. Was this

the forest territory?

"Look here!" Cinderpelt was padding over to the huge rock. "This is Highrock." Not the highledge.

Then she turned and bounded over to the bramble bush that smelled of Thornclaw. "And this is the warriors' den. The elders' den is over there." She flicked her tail toward a fallen tree. "And over here"—she raced across the clearing to another bush—"is the apprentices' den. I used to sleep here before . . ." Her mew trailed away, her eyes growing misty. She blinked. "Then I moved to Yellowfang's den." Yellowfang! The name seared Jaypaw's ears. Yellowfang had been ThunderClan's medicine cat before Cinderpelt. He could picture her, yellow eyes sparking, matted pelt bristling with impatience...

"Come and see!" Cinderpelt's mew interrupted his thoughts.

An eerie feeling pricked his tail as she led him through a narrow tunnel to a much smaller clearing. A rock towered at the far end, split down the middle by a cleft big enough for a den. Cinderpelt gazed wistfully into the shadowy cave. "Yellowfang kept her herbs in there."

"Yellowfang's dead," Jaypaw mewed. "She's in StarClan now."

Cinderpelt looked at him. "Well yes, but I am too."

"I don't understand. Where are we? You should be in Starclan...and I thought I would be visiting Cinderpaw"

"Oh little one," Cinderpelt let out a small purr of amusement, her voice touched with pity. "One day you may understand how you were able to bring me here. But that is not what we're here for. You are with me because I wanted to speak with you."

"Do you have a message for me?" Jaypaw asked, feeling a stab of disappointment that he wasn't able to get where he wanted to go. "Why is it worth stopping me from seeing Cinderpaw?"

Cinderpelt dipped her head. She looked warmly at him, and when she spoke her voice seemed deeper, more wise, as if she'd aged in

front of him. "Tell Leafpool that she has nothing to fear. I will recover this time. And tell her that I am proud of her. She has learned more than I could ever have taught her."

Jaypaw's pelt bristled. Vivid images were thronging in his mind: a young gray cat running through an unfamiliar forest, a monster screeching off a Thunderpath, agony piercing her hind leg, blood and the wails of her Clanmates; memories of learning herbs, limping after Yellowfang, of kits born in a river of blood, of fear and the forest being ripped apart by monsters, of a long hard journey through snow and ice and of snarling, vicious black-and-white creatures, jaws snapping, hungry for revenge and for death...Jaypaw took a gulp of air, his paws unsteady beneath him.

"You had an injury too, like Cinderpaw's."

The old medicine cat nodded. "Yes, it's the reason I couldn't be a warrior. That's why Leafpool is worried right now. But she has no need. History doesn't have to repeat itself."

Jaypaw shook his head, trying to come to terms with what Cinderpelt told him. "Is it a coincidence? Both you and Cinderpaw having the same name, pelt color, and injury?" Starclan couldn't have planned this, could they? They would have no reason to be that cruel to Cinderpaw.

Cinderpelt drew in a large breath, placing her tail on Jaypaw's shoulder to lead him to the far side of the clearing, beneath the highrock. "Cinderpaw, well, Cinderkit at the time, was born in the moment I died to save her, along with Sorreltail and the other kits. When I died, Starclan gave me the option to go back."

"Go back?" Jaypaw repeated in confusion. "What in Starclan's name would that mean?" A moment after he spoke Jaypaw realized the irony of the phrase. He was in Starclan...sort of, and speaking to a Starclan cat. What did Starclan cats even say to each other when they were surprised?

"I don't know how, but Starclan believed they had a way to give me a new chance at life, with Cinderpaw." Cinderpelt herself paused, looking off into the distance as she was thinking about something.

But, though he tried, Jaypaw wasn't able to pierce the knot of thoughts to distill what that something could be. "Had I gone, I would have had the chance to be a warrior, the life I would have had without my injury."

"And you didn't take that chance?" Jaypaw's eyes shot wide open. Cinderpelt was given the chance to be a warrior, not have a disfigured leg, live the life she always wanted, and she didn't take it? If Jaypaw was given the chance to come back and become a warrior, he would take it in a heartbeat.

"No, I didn't." Darkness began to consume the edge of his vision and as he looked down, Jaypaw could see his paws and Cinderpelt's fading.

"You're waking up, and I'm going back to Starclan." Cinderpelt told him. "Just make sure to help Leafpool. This isn't the same as before. I love-"

He awoke with a gasp, his pads wet, his tail fluffed out. He jerked his head up, darkness filling his vision once more.

"Jaypaw?" Leafpool's breath stirred his fur.

Jaypaw struggled to his paws and leaned over the injured apprentice lying next to him. Cinderpaw's breathing was light and steady.

"Jaypaw?" Leafpool repeated. "You were dreaming, weren't you?"

"Yes." Jaypaw tried to catch his breath.

"Will she get better?" Leafpool asked quietly.

"Yes." He paused, suddenly aware of Cinderpaw's body stirring in its rest beside them. Whatever they needed to discuss, they could do it in the morning.

"Leafpool?" Cinderpaw stirred beside them. Her voice was hoarse. She's awake! Leafpool's mind lit up with relief.

"I'll fetch you some water," Jaypaw offered. He found a wad of moss

and soaked it in the shallow pool at the side of the den.

"Here." He offered it, dripping, to Cinderpaw. She lapped at it eagerly, then murmured something he couldn't make out. He leaned closer.

"I'm hungry," she croaked.

He heard Leafpool purr with amusement. "That's more like the old Cinderpel—" She corrected herself. "Cinderpaw. I'll fetch her something from the fresh-kill pile." Jaypaw turned in her direction, narrowing his eyes. He thought he had made it clear after his dream that Cinderpaw had no part of Cinderpelt in her.

As Leafpool padded out of the den, Jaypaw heard Cinderpaw trying to stretch beside him. "Ow, my leg."

"It'll get better. You need to rest now."

"Where am I?" she murmured groggily.

"You're exactly where you belong." Jaypaw ran his tail along her flank. Glaring at his mentor, he led her to the back of their den. "What's the matter with you?" he snapped. "She's Cinderpaw, not Cinderpelt!"

"But there must be something there. Look at how similar they are"

"If there is, it's a coincidence!" Jaypaw felt Leafpool's breath on his cheek. "Cinderpaw is her own cat!"

"But she has the chance to be a warrior like Cinderpelt couldn't be."

"Just like Honeypaw or Lionpaw does!" Jaypaw growled. "You're just taking this personally because they look the same."

"But Starclan saw her as the perfect chance for Cinderpelt."

Jaypaw huffed. Why was Leafpool so totally in awe of her ancestors? He'd met them; they seemed no different from cats who were still alive. Did Leafpool really think that dying made a dumb cat wise? They could walk in other cats' dreams, but so could he,

sometimes. They didn't know the answers to everything.

"Jaypaw!" Cinderpaw's mew rang faintly around the den.

Jaypaw turned back to the apprentice. "Are you okay?" He briefly turned back to Leafpool "If you can't behave properly around her just let me treat her in peace." Contemptuous thoughts flooded her mind but Leafpool didn't speak again. Instead he heard her pawsteps moving towards the herb store.

"I'm fine." Beside him, the sound of a moss ball wooshed closer, tossed in by the kits playing outside. Judging its distance exactly, Jaypaw leaped and dived, rolling over as he caught it.

"Wow!" Cinderpaw purred. "Impressive." She was suddenly still. "What's it like?"

Jaypaw tipped his head to one side. "What's what like?"

"Being blind."

"What does it feel like being able to see?"

"I don't know, I guess it feels normal."

"Well, being blind feels normal to me."

"But isn't it hard not being able to tell where everything is?"

"But I can tell." Jaypaw appreciated Cinderpaw's honesty; most other cats acted like if they didn't talk about his lack of sight, he'd forget he was any different.

"Everything smells or makes a sound, and sometimes I get a"—he searched for the right word—"a sense of things."

"So you never get frustrated?"

"Only when I get treated like I'm different," Jaypaw replied. "I don't feel any different, so it's really annoying when anyone makes a fuss about my blindness. It's like they feel sorry for me when there's nothing to feel sorry about."

He flicked the ball into the air, then swiped it toward Cinderpaw. Her nest rustled under her.

"What in StarClan?" Leafpool's furious mew sounded from behind him. She darted across the den and whisked the moss ball into the pool, then rounded on Jaypaw. "What are you doing, making her stretch up like that?"

"It was my idea!" Cinderpaw mewed at once.

Leafpool ignored her. "You should have known better!"

Jaypaw bristled. "She didn't move from her nest."

"That's not good enough! Her leg must heal properly!" Leafpool's mew dropped to a whisper. "She must train as a warrior."

Anger exploded in Jaypaw's chest. "Oh she has to train as a warrior. You care so much about her future. But you didn't bat an eye when I had to become a medicine cat!"

Leafpool froze for a moment, then slowly replied, "You were meant to be a medicine cat, Jaypaw. It had nothing to do with your blindness. Cinderpaw is supposed to be a warrior. And I have you, I couldn't take on a second apprentice!"

Jaypaw's rage fell away. How could she put so much faith in what cats were destined to do or to be? Maybe Cinderpaw was meant to be a medicine cat. Maybe she was supposed to replace him, and let him be a warrior again.

Leafpool hurried away to Cinderpaw's nest and began fussing with her cobweb binding.

Jaypaw padded out of the den. He could hear the Clan, busy in the clearing. Graystripe and Millie chatted to each other as they wove the roof of the new den into place. Mousewhisker was chasing Foxkit and Icekit around the nursery. Ferncloud was sharing tongues with Dustpelt below Highledge. He could perceive the world just fine. However much his senses were different than another cat's, however much Starclan poked and prodded him towards some future they chose, they didn't own him. And neither

did Leafpool. He and Cinderpaw would turn out exactly how they chose to. I'm more than just a blind medicine cat! Jaypaw flexed his claws. I'll show them!

Chapter 14

She blinked open her eyes. Rain was battering the den roof, finding its way through the thick foliage of the yew branches and dripping into the nests. Hollypaw shivered and snuggled deeper into the moss but something wet was pressing against her. Lionpaw's pelt. Hollypaw shoved him away. "Move over. Your fur is soaking."

Lionpaw rolled back against her.

"Lionpaw!" She scrambled to her paws and stared at her brother. Morning light was filtering through the branches, just enough to give color to the pelts of the sleeping cats. Lionpaw's fur was drenched, as though he had spent the night out in the rain, though he was fast asleep now. Hollypaw sniffed him suspiciously. Perhaps he had just gone out to make dirt and slipped back into the den for more

Sleep. She yawned and stretched, her tail shivering with the effort. She felt cold to the bone. Honeypaw was asleep despite the rain. Poppypaw's nest was empty but her scent was fresh; she must have gone out with the dawn patrol.

"Hollypaw?" Honeypaw lifted her head and blinked open her eyes. "Did the rain wake you?"

Hollypaw shook her head. "Lionpaw did," she mewed. "He's soaking wet."

"He's been out in this?" Honeypaw rubbed her eyes with a paw.

"It looks like it." Hollypaw's fur was starting to itch with curiosity. This wasn't the first time Lionpaw had done something weird. He had woken her before dawn only a few days ago, slinking back into the den. He said he'd been out to make dirt, but his fur smelled of leaves, as though he'd been farther into the forest than just the dirtplace. And he'd snapped the answer back as though she was prying. She was sure he was up to something.

Honeypaw's belly began to rumble. "I'm surprised you aren't already out with the dawn patrol. But since you're up now do you want to check on Cinderpaw?"

Hollypaw nodded, her foggy mind finally remembering the details of the previous day. "Let's go and see her."

She picked her way among the warm bodies of her sleeping Clanmates and peered out of the entrance. The morning sky was dark with clouds and the rain was so heavy that mud danced over the clearing, but the scent from the little drops of rain stuck to the tufts of grass was bright and refreshing.

Stormfur and Brook crouched beneath Highledge, sharing a soggy robin beneath the sheltering overhang. "This weather's too wet even for RiverClan!" Stormfur called in greeting.

Hollypaw paused, blinking the rain from her eyes. "Now I know how fish feel!" She meowed, with a purr of amusement. Hollypaw peered up through the brambles at the gray sky.

Honeypaw nodded, coming up to stand beside her. "We'll all get coughs if this rain doesn't stop soon. That, or webbed feet." It had been over a half-moon since the daylight gathering, and it seemed to have rained every other day.

"Don't sit there like a startled rabbit, Hollypaw," Brook urged. "Find shelter!"

Hollypaw nodded, glancing back to make sure Honeypaw was coming with her before she hurried over to the medicine cats den, sending up a spray of mucky water as she skidded to a stop.

Honeypaw arrived first, glancing around the rock to look in at her sister. "She's in her nest." The golden she-cat's words came out in a silky whisper. "I can't tell if she's awake."

Hollypaw dipped her head, looking in at Cinderpaw for herself to get a look at how her friend was doing. The gray she-cat appeared very still, her rush-bound hind leg stuck out awkwardly in front her. But as she waited, she saw Cinderpaw twitch her ear, and her head

rose up from its place resting on the side of her nest. Hollypaw poked her nose through the trailing brambles that covered the medicine den entrance. "Can Honeypaw and I come in?"

Cinderpaw was sitting up in her nest, She was reaching forward to chase a ball of moss around the edge of her nest with her forepaws. Leafpool was soaking dried horsetail stems in the pool at the side of the den. She looked around. "Hi, Hollypaw! Hello Honeypaw." Hollypaw thought she detected relief in the medicine cat's mew. She pushed through the brambles.

"I'm glad you're here. Cinderpaw could do with some company." Leafpool glanced at her fidgeting patient. "She's finding it hard to keep still."

Cinderpaw patted the moss ball so that it flew across the den and landed beside Hollypaw. "Toss it back so I can catch it!" she pleaded.

"Don't you dare!" Leafpool leaped over and grabbed the ball in her teeth. "You've got to keep still if you want your leg to mend straight!"

Honeypaw nodded, her eyes filled with worry. "I would listen to Leafpool, Cinderpaw. You want to get better quickly, remember, so you can get out and train again."

Hollypaw purred with amusement as Cinderpaw rolled her eyes. Then she noticed Jaypaw at the back of the den. He was busily wrapping up herbs in leaf parcels and piling them against the den wall. He seemed totally absorbed in his task and didn't look up to greet his sister.

"What are you doing, Jaypaw?" she called across the den.

"Preparing herbs," he muttered. "What does it look like?"

"That's a lot of herbs." Hollypaw could smell bright scents. Marigold and...something else. Herbs for wounds. It seemed everyone in the clan was preparing for a battle with Windclan.

Pawsteps could suddenly be heard outside. The dawn patrol.

Immediately she headed for the entrance, terrified about what her mentor would say. Why didn't he take me on the dawn patrol? Did I not wake up? Why didn't I wake up? I'm not that tired am I?

The moment before she left, she thought to turn around. "Oh, feel better Cinderpaw! I need to go check in with Thornclaw." Both Cinderpaw and Honeypaw looked at each other for a moment before bursting into laughter.

"I figured as much." Cinderpaw meowed teasingly. "Go on."

Thornclaw yawned as he padded around the clearing followed by Dustpelt and Mousewhisker. Brackenfur emerged from the warriors' den and stretched, arching his tail and reaching out with his forepaws until his chest touched the ground. Then he made his way over beneath the highledge to set patrols for the day. Thornclaw broke off the patrol, straightened, and shook himself, fluffing out his golden-brown fur. "Hollypaw?" He peered toward her through narrowed eyes, rain streaming from his whiskers.

Hollypaw padded out from the shelter of the brambles. "I was just checking Cinderpaw," she greeted him.

"Is she doing any better?" He asked, his voice betraying genuine concern.

Hollypaw nodded. "Yeah, she's awake, and Leafpool's taking care of her." The black she-cat shuffled at the ground with her paw, unsure how to word her next question. "Thornclaw? Why didn't you-well, why didn't I come on the dawn patrol this morning?"

"You went through a lot yesterday, I couldn't expect you to be ready for a dawn patrol in those conditions."

"But when I became your apprentice you said I was supposed to be on duty every morning. You went out." Her last words came out in a plead.

Thornclaw finally sat down, indicating with his tail that his apprentice should do the same. "Hollypaw, you are a driven and talented young she-cat. I have no doubts that you will make your

clan very proud when you are a warrior. But for now, you are an apprentice. No one can expect you to take on every opponent, hunt every piece of prey, or go on every patrol. That will be your duty as a warrior. Right now, your real duty is to learn to fight, hunt, and follow the warrior code. You need to grow, both in your skills and as a cat, and as such your energy should be put primarily to that task. Yesterday you spent a lot of energy on growing as a cat, in learning what to do in a crisis and how to deal with pain once the rush of the moment is gone." The golden brown warrior lay a tail on her shoulder. "But if you're up for it, I'd still like to take you battle training today, for some sense of normality."

The black she-cat looked up at her mentor with wide eyes, feeling nurtured as if she was a kit again. But Thornclaw did believe in her. I'm not falling behind. That thought filled her with relief. "Yeah, yeah I'd really like that."

Standing up once more, Thornclaw nodded curtly. "Good. Go get Lionpaw then, and I'll get Ashfur."

The rain had stopped but the forest was still dripping water into the hollow as Hollypaw padded to the apprentices' den. Inside, the nests were empty except for Lionpaw's. Hollypaw could see his golden pelt rising and falling gently as he slept. How could he sleep the morning away while everyone else was busy looking after the Clan?

"Lionpaw? Are you coming for training?" she called irritably.

"Huh? What?" Lionpaw's head shot up and he stared, blinking, at her. "Is it dawn already?"

"It's halfway to sunhigh!"

Lionpaw leaped to his paws. His eyes were round with guilt. "Has Ashfur been looking for me?"

"Thornclaw's fetching him now. He sent me to get you." Hollypaw answered pointedly. She began tugging at the damp bedding closest to her, pulling at it with her teeth and shaking it to let moisture out and fresh air in. "Why are you so tired anyway?" she asked, her mew muffled by the moss.

"I didn't sleep well," Lionpaw replied.

Hollypaw glanced at him, but he was staring at the ground, as if avoiding her gaze. "Is there something wrong, Lionpaw?"

"No," he mewed quickly.

"Are you sure?"

"Of course!" His mew was terse, tightened to hide something...badly.

Hollypaw felt a wave of sadness. They used to share everything, but now getting details out of her brother was like trying to pick fleas off a hedgehog. Unless they jumped out by themselves, there was no way she could reach them. "Okay, okay! There's no need to bite my head off!" She started plucking at the moss again.

Lionpaw padded past her. "I wasn't biting your head off," he muttered. "But sometimes it's nice to be able to do stuff without being asked so many questions! Maybe you'll at least let me use the dirtplace in peace." He stalked out of the den, leaving Hollypaw alone.

She sighed and let the moss she was working on drop to the ground. Perhaps Jaypaw knew what was up with Lionpaw. He always seemed to guess what she was thinking. Perhaps he could do the same with Lionpaw. She headed for the medicine den and pushed her way through the brambles.

Jaypaw was sorting through herbs at the back of the cleft in the rock wall. "I'm busy," he mewed without looking up. "Leafpool wants me to see what herbs we need before she's done redressing Cinderpaw."

"I wanted to talk to you about Lionpaw," she ventured.

"Is he ill?"

"No." Hollypaw sat down, wishing Jaypaw would stop messing around with the herbs and talk to her properly. "He's just been so tired lately, and grumpy. Every time I talk to him he practically

nips my whiskers off."

"How should I know what's wrong with him?" Jaypaw pushed a pile of dark green leaves together. Hollypaw tried to remember their name—she had, after all, trained as a medicine cat for a while—but she hadn't a clue.

"It's just that you usually know."

"You share a den with him," Jaypaw pointed out. "I'm stuck over here with Leafpool most of the time." His voice prickled with resentment.

Hollypaw sat in silence for a moment. She decided to try coming at it sideways. Always a good hunting move when stalking tricky prey.

"Did you speak to Willowpaw at the Gathering?" she asked casually.

"Not much."

"I think she's worried you don't like her."

"Why do I have to like every cat I meet?" Jaypaw grumbled.

"Why do you have to dislike every cat you meet?" she shot back. "Willowpaw's really nice. You don't have to go out of your way to make her feel uncomfortable."

"I don't make her feel anything." Jaypaw turned back to his herbs. "She feels what she wants to feel."

"But doesn't it bother you when a cat is feeling off?"

"I can't tell."

Hollypaw felt a wave of frustration. This conversation was going in circles!

"Hollypaw!" Thornclaw was calling her from the clearing. She hurried out of the medicine den. If Jaypaw knew anything about Lionpaw, he wasn't telling. A small patch of blue had opened in the clouds above the hollow.

"We'll be focusing on fighting creatures larger than you today." Thornclaw meowed as she came up.

"Like foxes, or badgers." Ashfur added.

Hollypaw shivered. She still remembered the awful day when she and Jaypaw and Lionpaw had set out to chase the fox from the den and had ended up being chased themselves. In his terror, Jaypaw had fallen into a ditch and been injured. She looked over at Lionpaw, wondering if he too was thinking of their shared experience. But the golden tom stared pointedly at Ashfur, refusing to look her in the eye. Sighing, she turned to the entrance, ready to get this day over with.

The forest floor was soaked, the dead leaves slimy and rotten underpaw even as they came back to camp, but Hollypaw felt warmer from the run back up the slope after their lesson.

"You did well," Thornclaw congratulated her. She felt relieved that she had made up for the lost time this morning. "The rest of the day is your's." Her heart swelled with pride until she looked over at Lionpaw.

"What is wrong with you? You should have won at least half of those bouts!" Ashfur was growling at his apprentice, his eyes so thin that Hollypaw could barely see their blue.

"H-Hollypaw is a good fighter." Lionpaw stammered. Something really must be wrong. She knew he was still mad at her; They had barely spoken to each other through the whole lesson. And as well as Thornclaw seemed to think she did, it hadn't taken much effort to beat him.

"Don't give me that fox dung." Ashfur shot back. "Hollypaw isn't any better than you could be. What's the point in me training you if you're going to come out of it weaker and more cowardly than when you were a kit?"

Hollypaw looked down at Lionpaw's front paws, noticing his claws digging deeper and deeper in the ground.

"Ashfur," Thornclaw cut in. "Leave him be for now. Every cat has a bad day sometimes. I'm sure you did."

The gray tom was still grumbling, but he seemed to have calmed down. "I expect to see a better performance from you tomorrow." After his last words were said, he made his way over to the fresh-kill pile and Thornclaw followed him after waving his tail to Hollypaw as a goodbye.

Lionpaw wasn't a bad hunter, or fighter for that matter. Even in this state, Lionpaw never fell. He was strong, but something had sapped him of his reaction time. He was tired, really tired. Something is going on with him. And one way or another, Hollypaw was going to find out what it was.

An owl screeched far above the hollow, and Hollypaw rolled over in her nest, half-woken by the noise. She stretched her forepaws, feeling for the reassuring warmth of Lionpaw, and found emptiness. She blinked open her eyes. "Lionpaw?" she hissed under her breath.

No reply.

She reached farther into his nest, wondering if he had rolled to the far side but no, he was definitely gone.

"Are you looking for Lionpaw?" Poppypaw yawned from the other side of his nest. "He left the den a while ago."

Hollypaw sat up, her heart racing. Lionpaw had gone missing once too often. This time, she was going to find out what he was doing.

"Is something wrong?" Honeypaw's eyes gleamed in the darkness.

"N-no." Hollypaw didn't want to arouse the suspicions of the other apprentices.

"Has Lionpaw gone to make dirt again?" Poppypaw's mew sounded behind her. "He's been going a lot lately. Do you think he could be sick?"

Hollypaw felt a wave of panic. "I think he's just been getting bad luck with the fresh-kill pile. Ashfur usually brings him back too late

to get anything good, so he ate an old thrush tonight." The thrush Lionpaw ate that evening had been perfectly healthy, caught fresh that day. She didn't even know what her brother was doing yet and she was already covering for him. "I'll go and check if he's okay," Hollypaw mewed.

She crept from the den and hurried as silently as she could around the edge of the slumbering camp, keeping to the shadows. Lionpaw's scent led to the entrance, following the same furtive route. Let me find him making dirt, Hollypaw prayed.

Paw steps sounded behind her.

Hollypaw froze and glanced over her shoulder.

"It's just me." Jaypaw's mew sounded gruffly from the darkness, and the gray tabby stepped out of the shadows. "I thought you might want company. Besides, I want to know what he's up to too."

"Thanks." If Lionpaw was really making dirt, there was no harm in Jaypaw's knowing, but if he wasn't and, as Hollypaw feared, he was out in the forest, she would be pleased to have her brother with her. She paused, realizing she had never told him she was going out to look for Lionpaw. "And I guess you admit now that you knew something was wrong with him?"

Jaypaw's only response was a huff as he pushed past her through and into the small tunnel to the dirtplace.

"He's not here," Jaypaw whispered, putting a paw over his nose.

Hollypaw sighed, her heart heavy. "No, but neither of us thought he would be."

"What do you think he's up to?"

Hollypaw didn't dare reply. She could guess why he might have left the camp under cover of night, but she didn't want to believe it.

"His trail leads this way," Jaypaw announced, pointing with his nose up the lakeward slope.

Hollypaw's belly tightened. The trail led up over the ridge and then around onto the moorland: WindClan territory. Perhaps he's just exploring. Hope stirred in her chest, but beneath it, like a rock, lay the dark suspicion that he was meeting Heatherpaw.

"So we're following him right?" Jaypaw was staring at Hollypaw, his eyes seeming to look straight in her's even though she knew he couldn't possibly see them. Did he know about Heatherpaw too? Maybe. He did have a way of finding things out about other cats.

"Perhaps it's none of our business," Hollypaw suggested feebly.

"Of course it's our business! Our littermate is out there alone. Who knows what he's getting up to?" Jaypaw looked off towards the border. "He could be in troubled."

"Is that the only reason you want to follow him—because he might be in danger?"

"No." Jaypaw sat down. "I think he may be doing something he will live to regret."

Hollypaw nodded subconsciously. So they both had this feeling about him. All her instincts told her that Lionpaw was breaking the warrior code, and it was her duty as a Clan cat, as the arbiter of the warrior code, to stop him. She charged up the slope, sniffing the twigs and brambles for Lionpaw's scent, following the path he had taken to the top of the ridge. Jaypaw bounded after her with surprising accuracy and they quickly reached the edge of the trees. The ground sloped away in front of them, down to the shore where the lake sparkled in the moonlight. Hollypaw scanned the distant moorland, half hoping to see Lionpaw, half hoping she wouldn't. If Lionpaw was roaming around at night, she wanted it to be on ThunderClan territory.

There was no sign of movement in the shadowy heather. Hollypaw plunged down the slope, following an old rabbit track through the coarsening grass. Underpaw the ground grew more peaty as they neared the WindClan border. Heather bushes sprouted on either side of the track as the slope flattened and the sound of water lapping the shore grew louder.

"Did you hear that?" Jaypaw's hiss startled Hollypaw.

She pricked her ears. A cave entrance, ringed by heather, lay in shadow ahead of them. From it came the sound of voices. Hollypaw's tail bristled as she recognized Lionpaw's mew. He sounded happy; happier and more present than she had heard him in days. She crept forward, keeping low, and ducked into the swath of heather that shielded the hollow. Setting the bushes rustling, she wriggled between the bare stems and peered into the darkness.

Her brother was charging after a ball of moss like an excited kit. He dived at it as it landed and, with a tremendous swipe, sent it flying back in the other direction. A lithe shape leaped up from the grass to catch it. Its tabby pelt glowed in the moonlight. Hollypaw's heart sank like a rock. Heatherpaw!

"You don't seem surprised." Jaypaw had slid in beside her and was peering down into the grassy dip. His voice didn't lift to indicate shock either.

Hollypaw shook her head. "I'm not." Reluctantly she wriggled out from the heather. "Lionpaw!" she called.

Lionpaw and Heatherpaw froze, staring at each other in alarm. The moss ball fell to the ground.

"What are you doing here?" Hollypaw demanded.

Slowly Lionpaw tore his gaze from Heatherpaw's and turned to face his sister. His eyes sparked with defiance.

"What are you doing here?"

"Looking for you!"

"Spying on me!"

Hollypaw flinched. "You shouldn't be here, playing with her!" She glared at Heatherpaw.

"Why not? She's just a friend."

"A friend from another Clan!"

"You're friends with Willowpaw!"

"She's a medicine cat! And I don't sneak off every night to see her." Hollypaw's mind was racing. She hadn't wanted to believe it but here it was. How could he do this? Thunderclan was close to war with Windclan. How could he not see what this relationship could do?

"We just play in these tunnels. No one even knows about them, they wouldn't find us!"

"You're saying you've been hiding from your clanmates so they don't know you're making friends with a cat from another clan?" Hollypaw shook her head, trying to comprehend what he was telling her. "How far down does the cave go?"

"All the way under both our territories. Heatherpaw says there are a bunch of exits on Windclan's side."

Hollypaw's eyes were flaring up in anger. How could he not see how bad this was? "You're keeping the secret of a strategic advantage from your clanmates? What if she goes and blabs to her clanmates and they decide to attack?"

Lionpaw opened his mouth to object, but no words came out. Hollypaw knew she had won the argument. But her brother's eyes did not concede anything. They shone with rage. He turned to Heatherpaw. "I'd better go."

Heatherpaw dipped her head. "I know," she sighed.

Hollypaw clenched her teeth as Lionpaw brushed muzzles with the WindClan apprentice. Did he really believe it was just friendship that brought him here?

Lionpaw padded up the slope and glared at Jaypaw.

"Did you have to tell the whole Clan?" he hissed at Hollypaw.

Jaypaw flicked his tail, keeping his gaze narrow but not fuming like

Hollypaw was. "I just came to make sure you were safe," he explained. "No one else knows."

"And they won't know," Hollypaw added, "so long as you stay away from Heatherpaw."

Lionpaw glared at her. "Is that a threat?"

Hollypaw backed away. She had never seen Lionpaw this angry. Even when they had quarreled as kits, there had always been a lighthearted twinkle in his eyes. But not now. His eyes were cold as stars.

"If you continue meeting Heatherpaw, I will have to tell Firestar," she insisted, trying not to let her voice tremble.

Lionpaw bristled.

"There's a good reason why the warrior code forbids mixing with cats from other Clans," Hollypaw went on. "How can you be loyal to your own Clan when your heart lies in another?"

"Are you accusing me of disloyalty?" Lionpaw flattened his ears.

"I know you'd never be disloyal," Hollypaw mewed. "But you're making it difficult for yourself. How will you feel when you have to face her in battle?" The golden tom's gaze fell to the ground, and though he didn't voice it regret shone in his eyes. At least he's thought about this. "That's why you must stop this." It was hard enough to fight cats you've met without deliberately making friends outside the forest. Weren't Lionpaw's Clanmates enough for him?

A low growl sounded in Lionpaw's throat. He barged past Hollypaw and padded toward the trees. Hollypaw felt Jaypaw's fur along her flank, letting her own ruffled fur settle.

"He'll get over it," Jaypaw promised.

"I hope so," Hollypaw sighed. She knew she'd done the right thing, but she hadn't expected Lionpaw to react so angrily, as if he believed that he'd done nothing wrong. Would he ever forgive her?

Chapter 15

Lionpaw couldn't think to do anything but run. He didn't know what would happen when he got back, or worse, when Hollypaw got back, but he couldn't stand to be under her withering glare any longer.

He burst past the border feeling the familiar scents fill his nose. How could his sister turn on him like that? Heatherpaw was pretty, kind, and rewarded him for his successes. Hollypaw may have gotten a mentor who praised her for everything she did and the chance to win a competition in front of all the clans but he'd saved a cat!

Approaching camp, he wriggled under the brambles and pulled himself out the other side. If he hadn't come, Heatherpaw could have been killed by that dog, but no one rewarded him for that. So if Heatherpaw was willing to be his friend where his clanmates weren't, why should he have to leave?

The older warriors acted like they had created ThunderClan territory because they had brought the Clans to the lake, but Lionpaw knew that they hadn't explored every paw step of it yet. The fact that he knew about the cave proved that there were still places left to find. It would be the young cats who would do that, who would make this land their own. Old traditions shouldn't be dictating everything!

I couldn't agree more.

Through the leaves he could see that the star-studded sky was growing pale. He slowed his pace as he entered the apprentice den, tucking his tail over his eyes to hide the incoming light. He had to get some sleep before the camp woke.

"Greetings, Lionpaw." A deep mew sounded in his ear and fur brushed his flank.

Lionpaw bristled with alarm. He glanced sideways and saw the faint outline of a cat keeping pace with him. Am I dreaming? No matter which direction Lionpaw looked in, the vast shadowy landscape he was surrounded by seemed to go on forever. Tall, gray trees coated in some sort of fungus scattered the area, and combined with the darkness and meager supply of grass, the whole forest seemed dull.

"I have been watching you." The outline shimmered beside him—a huge tabby tom with amber eyes that shone in the half-light. The tom's voice and massive shoulders seemed strangely familiar.

"W-who are you?" he stammered.

"I have seen your skill in battle, and the courage and strength you have in those broad shoulders that mirror my own. I am proud to say I am your kin," answered the amber-eyed tom. Lionpaw took a deep breath as the looked up at the older warrior, and quickly noticed just how thick the air was. It felt heavy with the cold damp touch you might expect when it was about to rain, but there were no clouds in the sky that would suggest a change in the weather. If anything, the clouds seemed to have sunk to the ground with a thick layer of fog rolling over the hills to the point of sometimes making it impossible for Lionpaw to see his own paws.

Lionpaw glanced anxiously up at him. "Are you from StarClan?"

"I was a warrior in life," he responded, a growl edging his voice. "I don't hunt with them anymore."

The young tom twisted his head from once side to the other, looking for where he might be. The forest around Lionpaw was dimmed from the light with the thick canopy of trees overhead. The ground in the area was sandy, with no grass and little foliage for several fox-lengths. As he pricked his ears and tasted the air, he could catch no trace of prey. This certainly didn't seem like a place Starclan cats would go. The golden tom looked once more over the cat in front of him. The broad shoulders, gruff voice...it reminded him of his father. Lionpaw's tail pricked. "T-Tigerstar?" Why did he bring Lionpaw to a place like this? Why did he want to talk at all?

The dark tom bowed his head in acknowledgement. "Indeed. And as

such your father is my son. I have what you could call a vested interest in your future."

Lionpaw tilted his head. "What do you mean?"

"What does any cat mean when he says that?" Tigerstar sat down, though even as he did his shoulders and head towered above the apprentice's. "I care about you. I'd like to help you impress your clanmates, and Ashfur especially."

"What did you have in mind?" Lionpaw asked tentatively. He could help? Did warrior ancestors have the ability to take away tiredness or something?

"I can train you when you're asleep. You'll be getting stronger and more prepared for Ashfur's requests without losing sleep over it."

"You could really do that? Teach me the battle moves before Ashfur so I can do better when our spars come up?"

The massive brown warrior nodded. "Not only that, I could teach you to face your fears so less...unfortunate accidents happened."

Lionpaw felt a stab of pain in his chest. Cinderpaw had to come up to save him, and when she did... "But why help me?"

"I thought I told you before. You are my kin."

"But Brambleclaw doesn't like you! You left Thunderclan and became Shadowclan's leader. You even got Riverclan and some rogues to fight with you against Thunderclan to make Firestar-" Lionpaw was cut off, realizing he wasn't actually sure why Tigerstar had such a grudge against the thunderclan leader in all the stories. "You wanted to take over the forest, and break the warrior code!"

Tigerstar's eyes lit up with amusement. "I must say, given what you've been up to lately I expected you to be more understanding when it came to my code-breaking transgressions."

Lionpaw's gaze dropped as he felt a stab of embarrassment. It was true he'd been breaking the warrior code too, trying to meet up with Heatherpaw even when it...sometimes conflicted with his

apprentice duties. There's a good reason why the warrior code forbids mixing with cats from other Clans . Hollypaw's voice flashed in his head. How can you be loyal to your own Clan when your heart lies in another?

"She's wrong." Tigerstar spoke again, cutting into his thoughts. "Clan loyalty has been holding warriors back since the dawn of the clans."

Lionpaw shook his head. "That can't be right. We need clan loyalty so our clans stay safe. If we were allowed to make friends, w-we'd be upset when we have to fight them."

Tigerstar let out a huff, taking a pace back from the young tom. "That's your sister talking, I take it." He looked down at Lionpaw, his piercing amber gaze locking itself with the apprentice's. "There is no real reason the clans must fight each other at all. It's all senseless violence held in the name of a tradition that should have been snuffed out long ago." Lionpaw took a pace backwards under the harsh piercing gaze of his kin. Frantically he tore his gaze away, looking for anything in the clearing to look aside aside from the massive warrior in front of him. But there was no one. Where was every cat? Tigerstar was called evil in all the stories but he couldn't have really been forced to walk this forest alone since his death, could he? Even above, in the cracks between the trees where you could usually see warrior ancestors looking down on you, the sky was pitch black, without a single star in the sky.

"But the warrior code says we have to mark and protect our borders. What you're talking about isn't just a mistake, it's destroying the code altogether!"

" Changing the code. I don't plan to destroy anything." Tigerstar's response came immediately. "That was my goal all along anyway. What you call 'taking over the forest' I would call uniting the clans. There is no reason for the clans to be separate. The cultures in them change with each new leader's rein and the only noteworthy differences in cats are what territory or prey you prefer. Why should you fight over differences so minor?"

Lionpaw opened his mouth to reply, but found there was nothing he could say. Was the whole structure of the clans really that

meaningless?

"Starclan has no borders." Tigerstar's tail twitched slightly as he spoke, but he steadied it within a moment. "Why are they allowed to force them on the living?"

Why did they have borders? All it seemed to cause was heartache and fighting. Stormfur's parents were from different clans, and he never seemed to have a home, even now that he was with his dad. If they were all one big clan, maybe it would be better. "You might be right, but still, why are you interested in me specifically? Did you just come tonight because of Hollypaw?"

Tigerstar shook his broad head. "I've been with you for a while, as I said. Don't you remember the morning of your first assessment?"

Lionpaw's eyes shot open as a memory flashed before him. When Thunderclan was considering a war with Windclan, a breeze had ruffled his fur and a voice murmured in his ear. Be honest, Lionpaw. Don't be afraid of the things you desire. You know what you think.

He thought that had been his own voice, but the deep gruff tone was unmistakable. He knew Tigerstar's voice was familiar. "That was you?"

"Of course it was. You were already exhausted. I couldn't have you distracted too, when it came time for you to be assessed."

Tigerstar really did care. If this would really help him become stronger, and help all the clans even... "I'll do it. I'll train with you." Lionpaw wanted to ask Tigerstar more of his questions. What was this place? Why were they alone? But before he could open his mouth to ask any of them, the forest started to morph around him. The barely visible forest cracked. Light seared through and he began to feel the dusty floor replaced by a layer of soft moss.

Lionpaw crept out forward, moving towards the light opening behind Tigerstar and the hazel brush forming through it. "Tigerstar?" He blinked, and his strange mentor disappeared. The ghostly warrior had gone. Lionpaw woke and leaped to his feet.

Pale light filtered through the branches of the den, speckling the sleeping cats.

"Wait!" Lionpaw called in a whisper. "Come back." He had to know why he had chosen to appear to him in the first place, and when they would begin this training he has agreed to.

The ferns rustled where some apprentice had disturbed them at the entrance. Then the den fell silent, except for the call of the birds, heralding the morning.

Lionpaw wanted to see if Tigerstar would come back. He wanted to know why the dark warrior was taking so much interest in him. Jaypaw was the one who spoke with their ancestors. Lionpaw shook away the doubt pricking in his pelt. He should be grateful. Tigerstar seemed to care more about his training than his living mentor did. "Thanks, Tigerstar," he whispered out through the entrance.

Poppypaw's head shot up. "Are you okay?" Looking to his side, he noticed he and the splashed she-cat were the only ones left in the den.

"Just a nightmare," Lionpaw panted quickly.

Poppypaw leaned toward him, the residual exhaustion disappearing from her face as it was replaced with worry. "What about?"

"I don't remember," Lionpaw shook himself as he got up. Wasn't anywhere safe from the prying eyes of the other apprentices? "I'm going to get some food," he mewed, stalking out of the den.

Brackenfur was watching the camp from Highledge, with Firestar coming to stand beside him and speak with him. "We need to expand the warriors' den before the other apprentices become warriors," Brackenfur meowed. "It's already too crowded." The patrols must have already been sent out, Lionpaw guessed. Jaypaw was washing himself beside the halfrock that jutted from the earth on the far side of the clearing. He paused as Lionpaw crossed the camp.

"Are you okay?" Jaypaw tipped his head to one side. "When you rushed off last night I wanted to talk to you but..."

"I had a nightmare, that's all," Lionpaw grumbled. "Hollypaw was just being a pain in the tail. She didn't bother me." He padded to the fresh-kill pile, picked up a small, stiff mouse and carried it back to Jaypaw.

They shared it in silence. Jaypaw's tail kept pricking as he periodically turned his blank gaze onto Lionpaw, but he apparently decided against speaking up. At least his brother didn't seem to want to poke his nose into every aspect of Lionpaw's life.

The ground felt stiff beneath his paws, and much cooler than they had been any day since his apprenticeship began. The camp was already busy, even though the sun had not yet begun to warm the hollow.

Whitewing and Birchfall were speaking together by the entrance. The white she-cat's tail gently stroked the brown tom's back, easing his worried expression. Leafpool was heading for the nursery, and Squirrelflight was sharing tongues with Stormfur and Brook. Brambleclaw moved to join them, but as he did his gaze flitted over to his sons. Lionpaw immediately turned his eyes back to his meal, unsure of how much Hollypaw had told already but not willing to find out.

A shape was stirring on the other side of the clearing. The lithe outline of a cat peeled away from the shadows, followed by another. Lionpaw peered through the twigs at the emerging shapes: Dustpelt and Spiderleg were padding side by side into the pool of sunlight that lit the center of the camp.

"The others are just behind us," the long-limbed warrior told Dustpelt.

"Good," Dustpelt meowed.

Lionpaw strained his ears, listening. Dried leaves crackled beyond the camp wall. He heard the thorn barrier tremble as Brightheart and Mousewhisker pushed their way through the entrance tunnel

into the camp. The morning patrol had returned.

Brackenfur hurried toward them. "Anything to report?"

"All quiet," Dustpelt replied.

Mousewhisker held a mouse between his teeth. He dropped it. "It always feels great to hunt in the morning," the gray and white tom purred.

"Did you have time to patrol the Shadowclan border?" Brackenfur asked, eyeing Mousewhisker.

Brightheart nodded. "ShadowClan has marked it well," she meowed. "But there's no sign they strayed onto ThunderClan territory."

Dustpelt narrowed his eyes. "They'd better not. It's bad enough Firestar gave them that piece of land in the first place. If I catch any ShadowClan cat on the wrong side of the border I'll rip his fur off!"

"They wouldn't dare!" Brightheart growled.

"They dared before Firestar gave them the territory," Spiderleg pointed out. He glanced at the scar on Brackenfur's flank, a reminder of one of the vicious quarrels the two Clans had fought over the stretch of open ground on either side of the stream running down from the Twoleg clearing. ShadowClan had always laid claim to the territory, and Firestar had finally granted it to them at the last Gathering to save further blood being spilled over a stretch of land that was too bare to offer good hunting.

"It wasn't worth fighting over," Brackenfur commented. "Firestar was right to give it up." Lionpaw wasn't ever quite sure if Brackenfur had any strong opinions of his own about the borders. He tended to enforce Firestar's word more than engaging in clan arguments himself.

Dustpelt snorted. "ThunderClan has never given up territory before!"

"No," agreed Mousewhisker.

Spiderleg turned in an agitated circle, tail lashing, but Brackenfur went on. "However, the land was too exposed, and the Twolegs will be there soon, once it's greenleaf."

"And ThunderClan is more used to hunting in the forest," Brightheart added. "Even when the twolegs aren't there, there isn't much prey for us to find."

"Firestar still shouldn't have given it up so easily," Spiderleg insisted.

Lionpaw watched nervously from his place beside Jaypaw as Spiderleg glared at Brightheart. The long-limbed black warrior was even more hotheaded than his father, Dustpelt. But Brightheart refused to be intimidated.

"We gave up nothing but a piece of barren land that was too close to Twoleg territory!" she hissed.

"You sound like Brambleclaw." Dustpelt curled his lip. "He only agreed with Firestar's decision because any cat knows he'd rather face a pack of dogs than a Twoleg!"

Lionpaw's fur bristled with anger. His father wasn't scared of anything!

"Brambleclaw sided with Firestar because it was a wise decision, not because he was scared of Twolegs!" Brightheart retorted, sparing a glance over to the brown tabby as he shared tongues with his mate.

"Was it wise to stand before all the Clans and announce that ThunderClan can no longer defend its boundaries?" Spiderleg meowed hotly. "ShadowClan has no right to set one mangy paw on ThunderClan land!"

"Well, it's ShadowClan land now," Mousewhisker put in, seeming unsure about which side of the conflict he fell on.

Dustpelt glared at him. "Of course, you don't care how much territory we give up," he snarled. "You're not a ThunderClan cat!"

Lionpaw flinched. He knew Mousewhisker's parents weren't born in

the clans but Mousewhisker himself had spent his whole life training and fighting just like any other Thunderclan warrior. He watched closely, waiting to see how the young warrior would react. But Mousewhisker only stared back at Spiderleg, his eyes wide with shock.

Brackenfur stepped between them, his eyes glinting anxiously in the moonlight. "It doesn't matter if we disagree," he meowed. "The decision has been made."

"But now ShadowClan will think they can take whatever they want from us!" Spiderleg objected.

"Firestar made it clear that he was doing ShadowClan a favor when he let them take the land," Brackenfur reminded him. "He left no cat in any doubt that he was acting out of wisdom rather than weakness."

"Then why did Onestar and Leopardstar look so interested?" Dustpelt snapped. "It was obvious they thought ThunderClan couldn't defend their territory."

"Maybe that even encouraged Onestar to start pushing at our border with Windclan!" Spiderleg chipped in. "Compared to Windclan, our problems with Shadowclan in the past moons have been play fighting."

"No Windclan warrior have crossed the border," Brackenfur pointed out.

"But some apprentices have, with the border as shaky as its been," Dustpelt argued. "If he thinks we're weak he might see a chance to expand his territory."

"Can you imagine Firestar giving up any prey-rich part of our territory?" Brightheart asked.

Dustpelt glared at her for a moment, then dipped his head. "No," he conceded.

"And we don't have to worry about RiverClan," Brackenfur pressed. "We share no boundaries with them, and Leopardstar's been quiet

ever since Hawkfrost died on our territory. Whatever she might think of Thunderclan now, there's nothing she could or would do about it"

"Does any cat really know what happened to Hawkfrost?" Mousewhisker asked tentatively, avoiding eye contact with Spiderleg.

"Only that Firestar found his body while he was on patrol with Brambleclaw and Ashfur," Spiderleg meowed.

Lionpaw did not fully understand. Back in the nursery had heard Daisy and Ferncloud talking about Hawkfrost, the former RiverClan deputy who had died on ThunderClan territory, impaled on a wooden spike from a fox trap. No one was sure what the RiverClan warrior had been doing there. Lionpaw had tried to ask his father once about Hawkfrost—after all, Hawkfrost was Brambleclaw's half brother and therefore Lionpaw's kin— but Brambleclaw had been reluctant to answer. The only information he would give was that Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight had carried the dead RiverClan warrior back to his camp as they would have done with any fallen warrior, and that he had been mourned by his Clanmates. He wondered if Hawkfrost had ever been visited by Tigerstar like Lionpaw had. Maybe the Riverclan warrior was on Thunderclan territory to meet someone, like Lionpaw and Heatherpaw did.

As Lionpaw strained to hear whether the warriors' conversation would reveal anything new, he heard the thorn barrier rustle once again. He realized with a that this time the cats padding into the entrance included Thornclaw and Hollypaw, alongside Honeypaw, Cloudtail, and Hazeltail.

The black she-cat spoke with her mentor for a moment before locking her eyes on his position. "Lionpaw?" Hollypaw hissed as she came to sit by Jaypaw, facing towards him.

Lionpaw wondered for a moment if he could go back to his nest and bury himself in it, his pride would not let him. "That's my name..." he replied.

"Why was the patrol arguing?"

"They were talking about Firestar's decision to give ShadowClan the bit of land by the river," Lionpaw explained, thankful she wasn't jumping straight into their conversation the previous night.

"Dustpelt accused Mousewhisker of not being a real ThunderClan warrior." Jaypaw cut in.

Lionpaw flattened his ears. "I'm surprised that Mousewhisker didn't shred him!"

"But Dustpelt isn't completely wrong, is he?" Hollypaw pointed out. "Thunderclan has a lot of cats now who were taken in rather than born here."

"You'd better not say that to his face." Jaypaw warned. "He's already insecure enough without more cats validating his fear."

"Jaypaw!" Leafpool's voice sounded from the medicine den.

His brother let out a gruff sigh but stood to follow the call. "I imagine Cinderpaw's awake. I'd better check on her."

"Let me know how she's doing later!" Hollypaw called after him as he disappeared through the hanging brambles.

It hadn't occurred to Lionpaw before how important it was to the warriors whether a cat was truly ThunderClan or not. His own place in the Clan had always been something he had taken for granted. He supposed that not every cat was lucky enough to be born in the forest, with two senior warriors and Clan leader as kin. But he still didn't understand why Hollypaw and Jaypaw had taken the quarrel between the warriors so seriously. So long as cats like Mousewhisker were loyal to ThunderClan, what else mattered?

Looking back, he realized Hollypaw was staring at him. Had she said something? Did he miss it? "Huh?"

His sister let out a visible sigh, taking a moment to stretch out her paws before she focused back on him. "I just thought we should talk, if you've calmed down."

Lionpaw wiped a paw over one ear. Inside, his stomach was a hard

knot. He knew this was coming. He wasn't doing any harm by playing with Heatherpaw. But he knew Hollypaw wouldn't see it like that. I'm loyal to my Clan , Lionpaw told himself. I shouldn't have to prove it. But still, the bitter thought of her words stung in his mind.

"I'll just start with this," Hollypaw began, apparently deciding on his answer. "I'm sorry. I didn't mean to upset you."

Lionpaw's eyes shot open. She was apologizing? He opened his mouth to reply but found no words were coming to him. Of all the scenarios he had imagined, this wasn't one of them. "You can't have stopped following the warrior code over night." He finally meowed, still in disbelief.

The black she-cat dipped her head. Lionpaw thought he caught a glimpse of a hurt expression before her head went down but he couldn't be sure. "Oh, I haven't. I still believe you need to seriously think over the choices you're making, and how it would impact you, your clan, and your family if you continue like this." A deep breath swept through her, and she rested her tail on the ground to stop it from twitching. "But I don't have control over your actions. It is ultimately your choice, and I have to trust you to make the right one when you are forced to choose."

Wasn't as much of an apology as he thought at first. She was still against him meeting with Heatherpaw, and she still acted like the warrior code was the only thing that should dictate their behavior. If Tigerstar's plan worked somehow, she would most likely be against it. But it might be enough for now. "You aren't going to tell anyone?" He asked.

Hollypaw shook her head. "Jaypaw already knows, but he would probably have found out regardless. Unless you make it absolutely necessary...no one else will know."

Chapter 16

"I can't feel any swelling around her throat," Jaypaw told Longtail. "Just make sure she eats the coltsfoot I brought. Leafpool says it will ease her breathing."

"I don't need herbs," Mousefur grumbled.

"Take them anyway," Longtail urged. "At least it means you'll eat something. You've not had anything since last night."

"I don't like to take prey from the fresh-kill pile until it's filled." Mousefur meowed. "There are younger bellies to feed than mine."

"Well, eat the coltsfoot instead," Longtail meowed. "If only to give me some peace."

Muttering crossly, Mousefur used her tail to sweep the pile of shredded leaves toward her nest.

Jaypaw sighed. Listening to the elders fussing, he felt as though nothing had changed since his days with Brightheart. After hardly a half moon he was bored to the ends of his whiskers with doling out herbs, and he was somehow spending even more time with Longtail in the elder's den. He was meant to visit Stormfur in the warriors' den next and apply a honey-and-dock poultice he had made to his pads yet again. The warrior refused to rest, and the balm seemed to rub off as quickly as Jaypaw could apply it.

Leaving Longtail to deal with the stubborn she-cat, Jaypaw left the den, picking up the leaf holding Stormfur's poultice. Trying to block out sounds of cats chatting happily as he passed by, he entered the warriors den, finding Stormfur and Brook alone. The she-cat, and the tom as well, to a lesser extent, carried a different scent from the other warriors, the scent of mountains and tumbling water. It seemed to make them the strangest of all the cats who were not Clanborn. Was it just her scent, Jaypaw wondered, or was it something more he sensed in the mind of the mountain she-cat—

some wariness that had never left her? Regardless of their differences, it didn't make sense for cats to make a fuss about them. They had been loyal warriors since he and his siblings were born. Why did some still distrust them?

"Leafpool's sent another poustice I imagine?" Stormfur's dismissive voice came from the back of the den, and from the sounds it seemed the warrior was only just sitting down as he came in.

His mate purred beside him. "Well maybe if you keep it on long enough for it to do its work you won't have to keep seeing them." He had always liked the sound of Brook's mew—it was low and strange compared with the cats born around the lake.

Silently he sat down to apply the poultice, letting the pair chat on and tease each other while he worked. As he sealed the mixture in place he stood again, facing the dark gray tom. "It's done. Just rest for a while and you should be fine."

A moment of silence passed. Jaypaw guessed Stormfur made a gesture that he couldn't see, for after that moment a flash of embarrassment washed over the warrior's mind. "Uh, thank you." He meowed hastily. "Are you sure I can't hunt?"

Jaypaw let out a thick sigh, looking in the direction of the entrance. "What about rest do you not understand?"

"He's right." Brook's deep, even tones cut into the conversation. "I know you want to prove yourself here. I do too! But you need to rest sometimes or eventually, you won't be able to help them at all."

A small puff of air could be heard coming out of Stormfur. "I'm sorry..." He murmured, trailing off. If I can't show them I'll work hard for Thunderclan... Even his thoughts trailed off, as if Stormfur was unwilling or unable to contemplate what might happen.

Was that it? Leafpool had made comments about how often Stormfur shirked his resting periods but Jaypaw had assumed it was just a matter of the standard warrior pride. It seemed all of this was still about the comments the other clans had been making, and how those attitudes had seeped into arguments between even

Thunderclan warriors.

Leafpool appeared at the entrance of the den, bringing with her the scents of the medicine den through the brambles, and tearing him away from his thoughts.

"How's Mousefur's throat?" she asked.

"It feels fine," Jaypaw answered tersely. "Although it would be easier to tell if she stopped complaining long enough for me to feel it properly."

Leafpool's irritation spiked the air. "If you can't be polite to your Clanmates, you may as well come back to the medicine den and help me tear up the tansy that Honeypaw was kind enough to fetch for you yesterday!" she snapped. Jaypaw rolled his eyes. Another moment in the medicine den and he would burst! So much for his great destiny as a medicine cat. Spottedleaf hadn't warned him that life would be one tedious chore after another.

Leafpool led the way back to the den, her shoulders tense. Jaypaw padded miserably after her. He felt the opening lines of a lecture brewing in her like a storm, and nosed his way reluctantly through the trailing brambles and sat down. "You drift around the camp like a little dark cloud looking for someone to rain on," Leafpool snapped.

"I'm bored!" Jaypaw complained. He could practically see her fur pricking up in her fury. Why did she have to be so mad at him? Couldn't she understand that he had expected more from his life than this? "It's okay for you," he snapped. "You always wanted to be a medicine cat!"

"And you don't?"

"It's my destiny," he muttered. "Starclan wants me to be here. You want me to be here."

"I could always have chosen another apprentice." Leafpool back. "Starclan could too. You have a talent in this: for memorizing herbs and knowing what a cat needs. This isn't to mention that you were

able to walk in my dream when I went to the moonpool."

"So I'm just supposed to be happy because the world has chosen a future for me without regard for what I want?"

"You have a choice!" Leafpool growled unsympathetically. "You chose to follow me to the Moonpool. You chose to come to me and become my apprentice. If Starclan or I offered you the position that was a great opportunity, which you should be grateful for, but it was your decision whether or not to take it. You're a medicine cat now, so deal with it!"

Unhappily, Jaypaw padded to the heap of tansy Honeypaw had left and began to strip the leaves from the stems. He ripped at them carelessly, leaving long strings of stalk attached. Leafpool sighed and sat down beside him. Wordlessly, she began to nip off the trailing strips he had left. Her disappointment was apparent with every small sound she made. Guilt pricked at Jaypaw like a bellyful of thorns. He wished he could find the words to explain his frustration, but he knew that whatever he said would only make it worse. What would she say if she knew just how miserable he was at giving up his dream of being a warrior? And for this! A life of sorting herbs and worrying about scratches and bellyaches.

"We need to go check on Daisy." She finally spoke again, but the immediate sound of her pawsteps told him she wasn't waiting to hear his reply.

Jaypaw hurried after the older medicine cat, making his way across the clearing and through the brambles covering the nursery. He could hear Ferncloud's paw tapping as she spoke to Icekit and Foxkit.

"Keep your paws in your nest!" The queen chided. "Leafpool needs room to look at Daisy." Jaypaw felt a moment of amusement. Evidentially he and his siblings weren't the only ones Ferncloud used that scolding tone on.

"What's wrong with her?" Icekit piped up. Her voice betrayed a bit of worry for the she-cat who shared her den.

"Did she eat a hawk?" Foxkit asked. His words mirrored his sister's care but the tone was teasing.

"Of course not. She's just going to have kits." Ferncloud replied, leading them into the corner of the den as she saw the medicine cats enter.

Daisy's breath was more audible than normal. It must be hard for queens to adjust to lugging around more weight for a couple moons. Jaypaw slid in beside his mentor. "Is she okay?" he whispered. Despite the circumstances with his mentor, he couldn't help but be excited to welcome new kits to the clan.

"She's doing fine," Leafpool meowed stiffly.

She wrapped her tail around Jaypaw, drawing him close to the queen's belly. It felt more swollen than that of a normal she-cat. He ran his paw over the curvature of the belly, noticing the more distinct rise and fall.

After a moment, Jaypaw felt Leafpool's tail gently nudging him back. "Daisy is coming along well. Jaypaw, would you go outside and check with the patrol?" Her mind was fogged, guarding her feelings as turned away from her apprentice. With a grunt, he backed out of the nursery.

Sorreltail's voice came from the opposite side of the clearing. "I can't wait to hunt with my kits when they're warriors." Pride warmed her mew. "Honeypaw, Poppypaw, and Cinderpaw will be taking their assessments soon enough."

Jaypaw tensed. Is Cinderpaw's leg really strong enough? She had healed but she only left the medicine den a couple sunrises ago.

"It'll be great having them in our den," Mousewhisker put in. "It might stop the old warriors from hogging the best nests and stealing all the softest moss."

Graystripe purred with amusement. "We old warriors need the soft moss for our poor ancient bones."

"I didn't mean you two!" Mousewhisker mewed, sounding

embarrassed.

"I'm sure Thornclaw and Cloudtail will be pleased to hear that," Sorreltail teased.

"You won't tell them?" Mousewhisker squeaked in alarm. Despite the teasing tone of the conversation, Jaypaw could tell there was genuine worry in the young warrior's mind.

"Of course not!" Sorreltail called over her shoulder as she darted down the slope. "Besides, we're not old. The big generation of young cats in the last few seasons just made us seem that way."

"Oh Jaypaw! We found something Leafpool asked for." Mousewhisker's paw steps grew closer, followed by a rustle as something dropped at Jaypaw's feet. "Is this is?"

"Well I don't know what she asked for." He responded gruffly. Dipping his head down, he sniffed the leaves as he rubbed a paw along one of their edges. Mallow. They didn't need any immediately, but it was true they were running low. "They'll do."

Mousewhisker stayed in front of him for several sections, clearly expecting some kind of thanks or dismissal, but when he wasn't given one he hurried away. Jaypaw turned back to the leaves, bundling them together so they would be easier to take back to the medicine den.

"Can I help?" Hollypaw was padding toward him.

"Yes, please." Jaypaw was sick of the taste of mallow.

He felt his sister's tensed shoulder brush up against him as she leaned down to take one of the piles. Immediately he braced himself for an indignant speech about how Lionpaw, Windclan, the duty of a medicine cat or some other such duty-bound thing, and was surprised to find there was something else on her mind instead. She wasn't disappointed in anyone's performance. She was worried.

"Cinderpaw just told me her assessment's tomorrow," she mewed.

Jaypaw stiffened. So soon? "Has Cinderpaw ever complained about

her leg hurting?" he asked quietly.

"What?" Hollypaw leaned in closer. "Why? What's the matter? She's better, isn't she?"

Jaypaw nodded. "Leafpool says she is."

"Well, there's nothing to worry about then." Hollypaw sighed. "Sometimes I wish I could be there for it though. I'd like to see how she does."

"Cinderpaw's assessment?" Jaypaw thought for a moment. Watching Cinderpaw's assessment would give him a chance to be away from Leafpool for a while. And if it turned out Leafpool was wrong about her being healed...he'd want to keep an eye on her. "What's stopping you?"

"From watching her assessment?" Hollypaw gasped. "But that's not allowed, surely?"

"Is that part of the warrior code?" He replied dryly.

"What are you two talking about?" Lionpaw padded up behind Hollypaw.

"We were thinking about watching Cinderpaw's assessment tomorrow," Hollypaw explained.

"Is that allowed?" Lionpaw echoed his sister.

"I doubt it," Jaypaw mewed. "But we weren't planning on announcing it from Highledge."

"Let's do it!" Lionpaw decided.

"If anyone catches us," Hollypaw mewed hesitantly, "we can say we were just trying to get some tips before our own assessment. No warrior could object to that."

"Alright then." Jaypaw cut in. "We'll meet at dawn."

Birds chittering in the trees above the hollow woke Jaypaw. Dawn .

For once he was happy to hear them, as they woke him up on time to meet his siblings. It had been so long since Jaypaw and his siblings went on an adventure together. Their paths diverged quickly once they were apprentices, and recently they seemed to only meet to fight. It would be nice to be out with them for a shared purpose again. He stretched and climbed out of his nest, shivering. Early morning had brought a chill to the hollow, reminding him that leaf-fall would soon be here. He gave his paws and face a quick wash. The assessment would start early, and he had promised to meet Lionpaw and Hollypaw outside the camp.

"Where are you going?" Leafpool's mew startled him as he headed for the den entrance.

"I left some leaves behind," he lied.

"Will you be able to find them by yourself?"

"I was only there yesterday," he snapped. "I know exactly where to find them. I'm not a mouse-brain." He figured Leafpool would be too worried about offending him to ask him any more questions.

He padded out of the den and through the thorn tunnel. Brightheart was guarding the entrance. "You're out early."

Jaypaw could feel the she-cat's gaze, piercing deep into his fur. He pointedly avoided facing her. "I'm fetching herbs for Leafpool." He replied stiffly.

"Do you need an escort?"

"No," Jaypaw mewed quickly. "Thanks."

"The dawn patrol's out," Brightheart informed him, her tone turning less warm to match his. "And the assessment's going to start soon. So there'll be plenty of your Clanmates around if you need help."

"I won't," he assured her. He padded away, relieved that he knew this part of the forest so well. He didn't want Brightheart to see him fall flat on his nose. He headed up the track until he was sure he was out of sight, then ducked into the bushes. Lionpaw had said to meet by the oak where the mushrooms grew. It would be easy to

find; this time of year the mushrooms were strong enough for even a sighted cat to smell. He could detect their musty odor from the entrance of camp, and, treading carefully through the undergrowth, he followed his nose until he felt the peaty soil of the mushrooms beneath his paws. There was no sign of Lionpaw and Hollypaw.

Then the stench of dirtplace hit his nose. The bushes rustled beside him.

"Sorry we're late," Hollypaw panted.

"We couldn't think of an excuse for leaving the camp," Lionpaw added. "So we sneaked out through the dirtplace tunnel."

Jaypaw wrinkled his nose. "I can tell." They managed to smell stronger than the mushrooms budding around them.

"And I've got prickers in my fur," Hollypaw complained.

"Try rolling in the soil here," Jaypaw suggested. "It'll get rid of the smell and the prickers."

Jaypaw leaped backward as Hollypaw sent gritty earth spraying up into his face. "Thanks!" he muttered.

"It was your idea," she retorted, scrambling to her paws. She sniffed loudly at her fur. "And it worked!"

"Don't sound so surprised," Jaypaw mewed.

"Let me try." Lionpaw copied his sister.

"Now you smell like a couple of mushrooms," Jaypaw complained.

"It'll be good camouflage," Hollypaw pointed out.

"Poor Cinderpaw'll think she's being stalked by toadstools," Lionpaw mewed. After a purr of amusement, he turned his attention to his sister. "I'm honestly amazed you managed to get away from Thornclaw."

A wave of panicked thoughts passed over Hollypaw. "I've never

missed a session with him." She murmured. Thoughts were flitting through her so quickly Jaypaw could barely catch a hold of any of them. I need...Cinderpaw....Thornclaw will...code...friend...I'm supposed...forbidden.

"Then this'll be your first." Lionpaw replied, oblivious to what was going on in her head. "Exciting!"

"It's not exciting! We're breaking the warrior code." Hollypaw growled suddenly. "I thought you at least learned that lesson when we were kits."

Their brother huffed back. "Well excuse me! But maybe the warrior code isn't as important as you think it is."

"How could you say that!?" The she-cat shot back, now fuming with anger.

"Well, even you said it's important for us to be here for Cinderpaw. If that's true, then maybe the code only-"

Jaypaw pricked his ears. "Shh!" He could hear the undergrowth rustling in the distance. The sounds of his siblings quieted, though they each chose to stand on a different side of Jaypaw, and both cats' thoughts were still half-focused on the argument. The scents of Squirrelflight, Birchfall, and Cloudtail drifted on the early-morning breeze. "Follow me, and keep quiet."

He began to creep forward as though stalking prey, but a tree root snagged his paw and he stumbled.

"I'll lead," Lionpaw whispered. "Tell me which way to go."

"Straight ahead," Jaypaw muttered, letting Lionpaw slide past him. "Squirrelflight and the others are right in front of us."

After crawling a few tail-lengths through the undergrowth, Hollypaw tugged on Jaypaw's tail. "I can hear them," she hissed.

Jaypaw had already heard Cloudtail's deep mew. "I know you're ready," he was telling Poppypaw.

"There's a bramble bush here," Lionpaw warned. "Stay close behind me and keep low."

Ducking, Jaypaw crawled after his brother, feeling the barbs scrape his pelt.

Birchfall's voice was clear now. "I know you will all do your best. But remember, you are not competing against one another, only yourselves." Only a slight tremor in the sound of his words at the end betrayed the worry Birchfall felt. Good luck Cinderpaw. Jaypaw had to agree. He just hoped the assessment wasn't too hard on her.

"You can't help one another, either," Squirrelflight warned. "This is a test of your solo hunting skills."

"And we shall be watching you, though you may not see us," Cloudtail meowed.

Lionpaw halted, and Jaypaw wriggled alongside him, feeling the brambles pressing down on his back. Hollypaw pushed in as well. "This is so exciting!" His brother shivered with excitement.

"Shh!" Hollypaw hissed.

From the sound of it, the warriors and their apprentices were only a foxtail ahead of them. Jaypaw trusted that Lionpaw had chosen a spot where they were still well hidden, and hoped the mushroom dirt was enough to hide their scents. The air pricked with the excitement of the three apprentices waiting to begin their assessment.

"Cinderpaw can hardly sit still," Hollypaw commented.

"Poor Honeypaw looks petrified," Lionpaw whispered. "But Poppypaw looks as calm as a vixen."

"Nothing fazes Poppypaw," Hollypaw mewed.

"Stay focused." He muttered. Aside from in Lionpaw's head, the apprentices' minds were full of hope and determination, mingling together in the air like a dew covered meadow at dawn.

"Good luck," Cloudtail meowed. The three warriors melted into the forest, leaving the apprentices alone.

"Where shall I hunt?" Honeypaw mewed nervously.

"Trust your instinct," Poppypaw advised. "I'm heading this way."

Jaypaw heard Poppypaw's paw steps heading toward the bramble where he and his littermates hid. Not daring to back away in case he set the bush shivering, he flattened himself against the ground. Lionpaw and Hollypaw tensed beside him, holding their breath as Poppypaw's pelt brushed the leaves of the bush. Don't let her see us!

Hollypaw dug her claws into the soft earth.

Shh! Jaypaw stiffened. Then he let out a relieved sigh as the apprentice's paw steps scuffed away up the slope.

"She's heading to the shore," Hollypaw guessed.

"Honeypaw's going the other way," Lionpaw mewed.

"What about Cinderpaw?" Jaypaw asked.

"She's tasting the air." Hollypaw's breath tickled Jaypaw's ear fur. "She must have caught a scent. She's on the move."

"Come on," Lionpaw hissed. "Let's follow her." He began crawling out from under the bush.

Jaypaw followed, his brother's tail brushing his nose. Out in the open, he soon recognized the ground beneath his paws; they were following the bottom of the slope. Keeping close to Lionpaw's tail, and with Hollypaw's fur brushing his flank, he found it easy to keep up with Cinderpaw as she began to pick up speed.

"She looks confident!" Hollypaw mewed. "Her tail is up."

Lionpaw stopped without warning. "She's turning around!" he hissed.

Jaypaw skidded to a halt just before he crashed into his brother. He

felt Hollypaw's teeth grasp his tail and drag him backward; then Lionpaw bundled him sideways and the three of them tumbled through a wall of ferns in time to hear Cinderpaw's paw steps thrumming past.

"That was close!" Lionpaw panted.

In the distance, a screech split the air and Jaypaw heard the fluttering of wings.

"Mouse dung!" An angry mew rang through the trees.

"Sounds like Honeypaw's missed her first catch,"

Lionpaw guessed.

"Never mind Honeypaw," Hollypaw mewed. "Cinderpaw's getting away!" She pushed her way out of the ferns and began to give chase. Lionpaw nudged Jaypaw after her, and they were once more hurrying through the forest after the apprentice.

Jaypaw recognized a scent. "Squirrel!"

Cinderpaw's footsteps grew quicker.

"She's following it," Lionpaw mewed.

"I can see her!" Hollypaw whispered. "She's definitely stalking it. She's keeping lower than a snake."

"Has the squirrel seen her?" Jaypaw asked.

"It's fleeing," Lionpaw answered. "But it's still on the ground. I think it knows something's up, but it's not climbing yet."

"It's trying to escape," Hollypaw hissed to Jaypaw. "Cinderpaw's going to have to make her move soon if she wants to catch it."

"It's running along a fallen tree," Lionpaw mewed, "heading for an oak. Cinderpaw's got to attack now or she'll lose it."

"There she goes!" Hollypaw mewed triumphantly. "What a leap—"

Her voice broke off.

"What's the matter?" Jaypaw felt a flash of alarm. Through the bushes, he heard a scraping sound, followed by a dull thud. A feeling of dress began creeping along his spine.

"Her leg gave out!" Lionpaw gasped.

"She's crashed on top of the fallen tree!" Hollypaw yelped.

The air was suddenly thick with pained thoughts.

"She's hurt!" Hollypaw screeched. But Jaypaw was already racing for Cinderpaw, praying nothing would trip him up.

How could Leafpool let her out again when she wasn't ready? She needed more time to heal! And...why did Jaypaw let her go too? He felt the brush of his sisters fur past him and the breeze following behind it as Hollypaw leaped up to her friend, who was helpless and moaning with pain on the trunk. Jaypaw clawed his way up the trunk, the rotting bark splintering beneath his paws. Panting, he crouched beside Cinderpaw.

Birchfall exploded from the bushes. "Is she hurt?"

Waves of agony flooded from Cinderpaw's mind. My leg!

Jaypaw pressed his cheek to it. It was swelling already, hot and trembling. "It's her bad leg!" he called.

Cinderpaw's breathing was sharp and shallow. "It just buckled as I jumped," she croaked.

Birchfall scrabbled onto the trunk, pushing Hollypaw to one side. "I knew she wasn't ready!"

"We need to get her back to camp," Jaypaw told him. "Hollypaw, you go on ahead and warn Leafpool." Hollypaw hesitated. I left her last time too. "Go on!" Jaypaw ordered.

With the second command, Hollypaw scrambled away, the undergrowth rustling as she disappeared into the forest.

Cinderpaw, no matter what, you are going to heal properly this time. I'll be the one to take care of you.

Chapter 17

"It's okay, Cinderpaw," Birchfall soothed. "We'll get you home." He called to Lionpaw, who was still on the forest floor. "I'm going to hold her by her scruff and jump down. I need you to make sure her injured leg doesn't hit anything, or touch the ground. Do you think you can do that?"

"Yes." More than her tail this time.

Cinderpaw moaned as Birchfall lifted her carefully by scruff. At least she's still awake. Birchfall's thought came to Jayfeather's mind as well.

Lionpaw's hind paws stumped heavily on the forest floor as he reached up to help. Jaypaw leaped down beside him, his pelt brushing Cinderpaw's as she dangled in midair. Carefully, Birchfall slid down from the tree. Cinderpaw wailed as they landed and Birchfall laid her on the ground.

Jaypaw pressed his cheek to her trembling flank. Her heart was steady and strong. "Can you walk on three legs?"

"I think so," she groaned.

"We'll help you," Lionpaw promised.

Fur scraped the leafy floor as Cinderpaw dragged herself onto three paws. Jaypaw scuttled out of the way to let Lionpaw and Birchfall press against either side of her.

Slowly, the injured apprentice limped forward, her paws thudding unevenly on the ground.

Every step stabbed Jaypaw like a thorn. "Can't you carry her?" He bristled with frustration. "Leafpool needs to check her over." What if she goes into shock?

"Steady, there." Birchfall wouldn't let him hurry them. "We could

damage her leg more."

At last they reached the thorn barrier and made the final snail-slow steps through the tunnel. Hollypaw was waiting for them inside, her pelt bristling with worry. "She's walking!"

"Not exactly," Cinderpaw grunted.

"How bad is it?" Graystripe called across the clearing.

Daisy was at the nursery entrance. "Is it broken again?"

"We don't know yet." Jaypaw circled his patient anxiously as Lionpaw and Birchfall helped her to hobble across the clearing. Hollypaw held the brambles to one side as they reached Leafpool's den.

"Lie down here," Leafpool told Cinderpaw as soon as they entered. From the smell of it she had already prepared a bed of fresh moss in a quiet corner of the cave. Cinderpaw grunted with pain as her fur brushed the moss.

"Outside, please." Leafpool shooed Hollypaw and Lionpaw away.

Hollypaw objected. "But I want to stay with Cinderpaw!"

"You can visit her later." Leafpool was adamant. The two apprentices were bundled out of the entrance. "What happened?" Leafpool's mew was brittle as she turned to Birchfall.

The warrior began to explain. "She was jumping over a fallen tree —"

Cinderpaw butted in. "My stupid leg gave way! And now I've failed my assessment!"

"It doesn't matter," Birchfall tried to reassure her, but Cinderpaw was pulsing with anger.

"Of course it matters!" she snapped. "I don't want Honeypaw and Poppypaw to move to the warriors' den without me. I wanted to sit the warriors' vigil with them, not on my own!"

"I know you're upset," Leafpool soothed. "Let's just see if we can make you more comfortable." Her mew was calm, but Jaypaw could sense distress crackling beneath her pelt as she began to run her pads over Cinderpaw's leg. "Nothing broken," she mewed. "It's not as bad as before."

"Feels like it's worse," Cinderpaw grumbled.

"You've just wrenched the muscles," Leafpool assured her. "They'll heal with rest."

"But why did it give way?"

Leafpool didn't answer but spoke instead to Birchfall.

"Leave her to me," she mewed softly. "I'll let you know how she is as soon as I've finished treating her."

Jaypaw ducked out of the way to let Birchfall pass as the warrior padded out of the den. He wondered whether he should offer to help, but Leafpool seemed so caught up in Cinderpaw's injury that he remained quiet, crouching near the entrance, ready if she needed him.

"Why did it give way?" Cinderpaw repeated her question more fiercely. "Didn't it heal properly last time? Will it always be weak? What if I can never be a warrior?"

Jaypaw felt Leafpool's rush of panic like a hot wind flattening his pelt.

"You'll be fine," Leafpool soothed. "I've made a poultice." She padded to the back of the den. Jaypaw smelled the tang of nettle and comfrey in the ointment she brought back and began smoothing over Cinderpaw's leg.

Jaypaw listened as Cinderpaw's breathing slowed. Leafpool sat motionless beside her, and only when Cinderpaw finally calmed did she turn away. A moment of surprised pricked from her when she saw Jaypaw. "Are you still here?"

Jaypaw sat up, stiff from crouching so long. "I wouldn't leave while

we had a patient." His voice quieted as he felt his mentor right in front of him

"I thought you'd gone out with the others," Leafpool murmured.

"You shouldn't have told Birchfall she was ready for her assessment."

"That's not for you to judge." Leafpool's voice quavered.

"You didn't even watch a training session to make sure she was fully fit."

"You don't understand!"

"I do," Jaypaw answered quietly. He nodded toward the cave entrance, beckoning Leafpool outside. She followed him to the bramble patch. No one would overhear them there.

Jaypaw took a deep breath. "I know that you want Cinderpaw to become a warrior as soon as possible. You don't want her to suffer the same fate as Cinderpelt."

"What's wrong with that?" Leafpool demanded. "Not being able to become a warrior broke Cinderpelt's heart."

There are worse fates. "You're obsessed with the past," Jaypaw warned her. "You want to make sure everything turns out the way you think it should."

"I just want to do what's right."

"You can't always do the right thing. No matter how much you want to. Trying beyond hope to make this future come might push it further away."

"I know." Grief pulsed from his mentor, sharper and deeper than Jaypaw expected. "But I'll always try. I have to."

"Can you fetch me some water?"

Cinderpaw hadn't even tried to leave her nest since she'd been

brought in. Not even when Firestar had summoned the Clan to share the news about WindClan's latest escapades at the border.

"You can drink from the pool yourself," he mewed crossly.

There was a moment's silence, then, "Please!" How could she beg like that? She was almost a warrior!

Though even Jaypaw padded to her nest and leaned in till he felt his whiskers brush hers. "Your leg's going to be fine," he snapped. "But only if you use it!"

"But what if it isn't?" Cinderpaw mewed pitifully.

"Then..."

Leafpool shouldered past him. "Don't worry, Cinderpaw," she soothed. "We're still mulling over the best way to heal your leg, that's all."

Liar! Jaypaw flushed hot with anger. Why was she so determined to keep Cinderpaw in the dark about her injury?

Leafpool's tail swished over her patient's pelt.

"I knew you couldn't make it better." Cinderpaw's mew was barely more than a whisper. "I'm never going to be a warrior, am I?"

"You need to rest," Leafpool told her. "Your ears feel hot." Moss rustled as she fussed with Cinderpaw's nest. "Jaypaw?" she called over her shoulder. "Bring Cinderpaw some water, please."

Jaypaw stomped to the pool, picked a wad of moss from the pile kept beside it, and dipped it into the cold water. If she spoils her like this, of course her leg will never get better. Leafpool was wrong about everything! He dropped the soaking moss beside Cinderpaw's nest and padded out of the den.

He stood beside the bramble patch and breathed deeply, hoping the fresh air would clear his thoughts.

"Jaypaw?" Leafpool's mew surprised him.

"I thought you'd still be fussing over your patient," he snapped.

"I'm sorry I was short with you," Leafpool apologized. "But we have to keep her spirits up, because somehow we are going to heal her completely."

"And how are you so sure?" Jaypaw demanded.

"Because it wouldn't be fair otherwise." Leafpool sat down heavily. "If she's really not Cinderpelt, she can't be influenced by Cinderpelt's life; don't you see?"

"But you're influenced by it," Jaypaw argued. "Are you really treating her the same way you'd treat Poppyfrost or Honeyfern? Every time you go near her, your thoughts are filled with Cinderpelt."

Even as he spoke, he glimpsed memories flashing through Leafpool's mind: of a badger forcing its way into the nursery and snapping at Cinderpelt as she stood in front of Sorreltail's newborn kits. "You're doing it now!" he accused. "It's not your fault Cinderpelt died."

"But it is!" Leafpool's mew was thick with grief. "If I hadn't left the Clan . . ." Fog instantly shrouded her thoughts, shutting Jaypaw out.

"You can't keep doing that!" he snapped. "It's clouding your judgement!"

Weariness suddenly seemed to engulf her. "I just want to be sure she'll have a life she can be happy with, as a warrior."

"Then why would you send her out to push her leg when it wasn't really healed?"

"I don't want her to suffer any more."

"You're not doing her any good," Jaypaw accused. "She's too scared to move, and you're too scared to let her!"

"That's not true," Leafpool hissed.

"Really?" Jaypaw lashed his tail. "Then why don't you go in there

and tell her to get her own water next time?"

"Because I don't know if that would help her or harm her."

Jaypaw could hardly believe his ears. How could his mentor have lost so much faith in her own judgment? "You've examined her leg! You know it's just her muscles that are hurt this time!"

"But I was wrong last time," Leafpool pointed out. "I said she was ready for her assessment and I was wrong." Her voice dropped to a whisper. "I've failed her, and I've failed StarClan."

Frustration welled in Jaypaw's belly. "Do you always give up so easily?" he growled. "I thought this mattered to you, but maybe it doesn't matter enough!" Without waiting for her reply, he turned and padded across the clearing. He wanted to get out of the hollow and as far away from Leafpool as possible.

Brackenfur was guarding the entrance. "Hello, Jaypaw. Do you want someone to go with you?"

"No!" Jaypaw headed into the trees.

Following the scent and direction of the breeze, he headed for the lake. The air felt cool and damp, with a chill that hadn't left it since the recent rains. He picked his way through the woods, following a path he knew well. Emerging from the trees, he padded down the slope toward the beach. Jaypaw stepped down off the bank, his paws sinking into the shingle. He padded forward.

Splash!

Jaypaw's paw plunged into water, not deep, but enough to make him slip, trembling as he fell forward, further into the depths. His heart began to beat faster as he waved his paws around frantically at the water around him, feeling for some way out. A wave rushed by, flipping him over and losing him his only sense of direction. The lake must have risen from all the rain. His fur seemed to suck in the water, leaving him closer and closer to sinking. Help! He wailed silently.

"Don't flail as much!" A deep voice came from some undetectable

direction. "Keep your chest steady, and use your paws. I'm coming for you!"

His ears were too filled with water and the crashes of the waves around him to discern who was speaking but all he could do was trust them. Taking a deeper breath, he fought the urge to thrash randomly, letting his paws drop as if he were safe on the shore. Teeth grasped his tail, and Jaypaw was jerked backward onto the top of the bank. It was Firestar.

"I was just . . ." Jaypaw searched for the right words. He felt his leader's tongue immediately go to work on his fur, taking out the extra water so he could warm up.

"You're safe now," Firestar meowed after a moment. Laying his tail on Jaypaw's back, he turned to face the hill back to camp. "Come on," Firestar meowed. "Let's head back together."

Jaypaw's head fell but he followed his Clan leader up the grassy slope that led to the forest. "How's Cinderpaw?" Firestar asked. There was worry in his voice, but much like Leafpool his thoughts were guarded.

"She'll be okay, won't she?" Firestar pressed.

Jaypaw answered cautiously. "She's in a lot of pain. It's hard to tell how bad the injury is." He didn't want to contradict anything Leafpool might have said.

"That name must bring bad luck," Firestar murmured, half to himself.

They walked in silence to the hollow, and, as they entered the camp, Leafpool trotted up, breathless. "Are you okay?" she asked Jaypaw.

"He's fine," Firestar told her. "I met him in the woods and we walked back together."

Jaypaw was grateful that Firestar hadn't mentioned the slip in the lake.

"Then come on, Daisy has a tick we need to treat."

As Jaypaw headed for the medicine cat den, Jayfeather couldn't stop thinking about his fall. The water had dragged at his pelt until he had stopped fighting it. Then he had floated, like a piece of bark. He remembered the sensation of his paws churning, the water pushing and pulling at him like wind. He had felt as light as thistledown. RiverClan cats could swim. Jaypaw had even heard stories of Firestar and Graystripe swimming through a flood to rescue a nest of kits.

He halted.

"What's the matter?" Leafpool stopped beside him.

"Nothing," Jaypaw answered. But an idea was forming in his mind.

A screech made him jump. Honeypaw was yelping in pain beside the nursery. "A thorn's poked her eye!" Poppypaw yowled. "A branch was sticking out of the nursery wall!"

"I thought I'd weaved them all back in!" Graystripe came pounding across the clearing.

"Don't panic!" Leafpool darted from Jaypaw's side. "The thorns aren't big. At worst it'll be a scratch."

Jaypaw raced to the medicine cat's den. Honeypaw would be fine. He had something more important to do. He burst through the brambles and heard moss crackle as Cinderpaw stirred in her nest.

"What is it?" she called in alarm.

"You have to swim!" Jaypaw mewed excitedly.

"Swim?" Cinderpaw gasped. "But I can't swim!"

"You could if you tried." Jaypaw hurried to her nest. "RiverClan cats do it all the time."

"But they're RiverClan."

"Don't you see?" Jaypaw paced beside her, unable to keep still. "You can practice using your leg in water. That way you won't have to put any weight on it, but it'll get stronger."

"Stronger?" Cinderpaw echoed, sounding dazed.

"It'll be like walking on it, but easier," Jaypaw pressed.

"Where will I swim?"

"In the lake, of course!"

"How will I get there?"

"You managed to walk back to camp, didn't you?" Jaypaw reasoned. "And you've rested since then."

"How will I know what to do?"

"I'll teach you." Jaypaw ignored the fear pricking in his pelt at the thought of getting his paws wet.

"You?" A purr of amusement rumbled in Cinderpaw's throat. It was the first time she'd purred since her accident.

Jaypaw knew he could convince her now. "I'll do my best," he promised.

"Leafpool will think we're crazier than hares."

"Let's not tell her, then. It can be our secret. Think how surprised she'll be when she sees you walking on four paws again."

Cinderpaw didn't speak, but Jaypaw could detect a small flower of hope budding in her mind.

"Okay," she agreed at last.

"We'll start tomorrow." Jaypaw felt jubilant. "You'll be better in no time."

Cinderpaw flicked his ear with her tail. "If I don't drown first."

Jaypaw blinked open his eyes. He could hear Leafpool stretching in her nest. It must be dawn. The medicine cat sat up and yawned. Jaypaw waited for her to leave the den to make dirt, as she always did first thing.

Padding from his nest, he tried to ignore the doubt rumbling in his belly. Even if teaching Cinderpaw to swim didn't heal her leg, it would prove to Leafpool that he hadn't given up on their patient, that they could really make a difference.

"Jaypaw?" Cinderpaw was calling him. "Leafpool's gone out." She sounded nervous. "But she'll probably be back in a moment. Perhaps we should leave this swimming idea for another time."

"If we hurry, we can be gone by the time she gets back."

He was nervous too, but he refused to let it stop either of them. "We have to try this."

Cinderpaw gave a resigned sigh, and her nest rustled as she struggled to her paws. "Ow!"

"Your leg's just stiff," Jaypaw reassured her.

"Could I have a couple of poppy seeds, just to ease the pain?" Cinderpaw begged.

"No." Jaypaw was firm. "They'll make you sleepy, and you'll need all your wits about you if you're going to learn to swim."

A pause. Then determination hardened Cinderpaw's mew. "Okay."

Jaypaw slid beside her, pressing his shoulder to hers so that she could lean on him. She was heavy, and he struggled to help her out of the den. Once outside the bramble-covered entrance he checked the clearing, tasting the air and pricking his ears for any sign of life. Squirrelflight's scent was by the entrance, but it had faded. She must have gone to the warrior's den after guarding that night.

"Come on." He nudged Cinderpaw forward, and they made awkward progress across the clearing. Jaypaw tensed every time Cinderpaw stumbled and growled with pain. He willed her on, praying her

courage would hold and hoping no one could hear her. Checking one last time for signs of life, he steered Cinderpaw into the thorn tunnel and nudged her onward. "You're doing really well," he encouraged.

"I'm not getting much choice," she grumbled. She was panting with effort by the time they had cleared the camp. Once they reached the trees, Jaypaw relaxed a little. They would be out of sight of the camp guard and any patrol here.

"Rest a moment," he mewed.

Cinderpaw sat down, relieved. "Where are you going?"

"Just scouting for the best route." He felt his way carefully forward, testing the ground for slippery leaves, checking that no fallen branches blocked the path. Cinderpaw was in a lot of pain, and he wanted to make the journey as easy as possible for her.

When he returned, she had flopped onto her side, but her breathing had eased. Jaypaw sniffed her leg, touching his nose to her fur. It didn't feel too hot, and the swelling hadn't grown any worse.

"Your leg's doing great," he mewed.

"Doesn't feel like it," Cinderpaw moaned.

"Imagine we're going to save a drowning kit," Jaypaw suggested.

Cinderpaw lifted her head.

"You wouldn't let a sore leg stop you from getting there."

She heaved herself to her paws. "No way!"

That's more like the old Cinderpaw! "Come on, then." Jaypaw pressed in beside her once more, taking her weight the best he could.

Her whiskers twitched, tickling his cheek. "A blind cat leading the way!"

"I bet you never thought it was possible." Jaypaw was glad to hear her joking.

The smooth grass beyond the trees was slippery, and they slid and stumbled down the slope toward the lake. "Are you sure you're not trying to make me worse?" Cinderpaw mewed through gritted teeth as they fell for the third time.

"It'll be worth it, I promise." Jaypaw hoped it was true. Was swimming really the answer? StarClan, let me be right! A cool breeze lifted their fur as he finally helped Cinderpaw onto the beach. The shingle crunched under their paws.

"The lake's beautiful today," Cinderpaw breathed. "With the wind ruffling the water, it looks like soft gray fur."

Jaypaw padded cautiously forward, expecting to find himself wading at any moment. But the water level had fallen since yesterday. He hopped backward as the waves lapped unexpectedly at his paws.

"Is it cold?" Cinderpaw mewed anxiously.

"Not too bad." Jaypaw's fur along his spine rippled. He'd have to wade in with her. How else could he persuade her there was nothing to worry about? Tensing against the tug of the lake, he padded a tail-length out, trying not to show how much he hated the feel of the water soaking his leg fur. "Come on!"

Water splashed as Cinderpaw limped out after him. "Now what?" she asked, pausing beside him.

"Just keep walking until you can't feel the stones under your paws anymore."

Cinderpaw's fur bristled. "You make it sound so simple."

"It is." Jaypaw remembered struggling to swim yesterday, the terrifying sensation of water dragging him down, how he'd fought to stay afloat. "You'll know what to do," he promised Cinderpaw. After all, he'd managed to stay afloat, hadn't he?

Cinderpaw pressed against him, fear pulsing beneath her pelt. "I can't."

"Do you want to be a warrior?" he asked Cinderpaw.

Cinderpaw didn't hesitate. "Of course."

Jaypaw didn't need to say another word. Cinderpaw was wading deeper into the lake. She gasped as the fur lapped her belly. "You told me it wasn't cold!" she squeaked.

"You'll get used to it!"

"The water's pulling at my fur!" Cinderpaw called.

"You won't have to wash for days!" Jaypaw joked. He hoped she didn't hear the tremble in his mew.

"It's over my back."

"Keep going, but slowly."

"It's soaking through my pelt. I feel heavy as a stone!"

Jaypaw heard splashing. Had he sent her to drown?

"I can't touch the bottom! Help!"

He rushed forward through the waves till the water soaked his chest. "Cinderpaw!" Blood pounded in his ears. "Come back!"

He could hear Cinderpaw flailing, and water spattered his nose. "What should I do?" She gave a spluttered cry; a wave must have washed straight into her mouth.

"Keep moving your legs!" Jaypaw yowled. "Imagine you're running. Use your tail for balance." Anything to keep your nose above water.

The splashing stopped suddenly. "Cinderpaw!"

No sound. Only the gentle splash of the waves on the shore. Had she been sucked into the depths?

"Cinderpaw! Are you okay?" he called more desperately.

"I'm swimming!" Cinderpaw's reply made him gasp with relief.

"Really?"

"What do you mean, really?" Her reproachful mew was drowned as a wave slapped her muzzle and she started to cough.

"Keep moving your paws!" Jaypaw urged.

"I am!" Cinderpaw spluttered. "And it works. It really works! I'm floating!" She coughed again.

"Concentrate on swimming!" Jaypaw ordered. He could hear her rhythmic passage through the water. She was heading along the shore. He splashed through the shallows, keeping level with her.

Suddenly a yowl from the bank made him freeze.

"Cinderpaw! What are you doing?"

Leafpool was calling from the beach.

"I'm swimming!" Cinderpaw splashed back toward the shore and padded, dripping, into the shallows beside Jaypaw. "Jaypaw taught me!"

Jaypaw flattened his ears, waiting for Leafpool to lecture him. But her gaze warmed his pelt. She was intrigued, not angry.

"Go on," she prompted.

"I figured the water would support her," he ventured. "So she could strengthen her leg without putting too much weight on it."

"And how does your leg feel now?" Leafpool asked Cinderpaw.

"It aches," she mewed. "But it doesn't hurt like it does when I walk on the ground." She began to wade back out into the lake. "Can I try some more?" She didn't wait for an answer, but could be heard plunging into the waves.

The shingle shifted as Leafpool reached Jaypaw. "Well done," she murmured.

He dipped his head. "Cinderpelt never got over her injury, but Cinderpaw can."

Leafpool ran her tail along his damp flank. "I hope so."

Chapter 18

Hollypaw watched the dawn sky lighten as she arrived back from the morning patrol. Was it still too early to visit Cinderpaw? Leafpool had shooed her away the night before; her patient had been sleeping. The thorn barrier rustled. The dawn patrol was returning. Dustpelt and Birchfall padded into the camp, followed by Whitewing and Hazeltail. Birchfall and Whitewing were already engaged in a hushed discussion with Dustpelt, so as Hazeltail entered the camp trailing behind them, she immediately searched the camp. Locking eyes with Hollypaw, she padded over to join the apprentice.

"Good morning Hollypaw. It's nice to find someone I can talk to."

Hollypaw dipped her head to the warrior. "Morning, Hazeltail. Were you checking Windclan this morning?"

The gray and white she-cat gave a curt nod as response. "And you went with Thornclaw to Shadowclan I presume?"

Hollypaw nodded back, trying to mirror Hazeltail's movement. "It was pretty quiet. We must have just missed their dawn patrol. How did Windclan go?"

The moment Hollypaw finished speaking, Hazeltail twitched, and the fur on the back of her neck stood up. Hollypaw narrowed her eyes in worry. "Badly?" She guessed, hoping Hazeltail would explain further.

Releasing a small sigh, Hazeltail dipped her head in acceptance. "With Dustpelt at the head of the patrol, I assumed we would stay on business. Birchfall and Whitewing must have had something very intriguing to say to pull Dustpelt away from his duties like this."

"Are you saying you didn't get to mark the border?"

Hazeltail shook her head. "No, we marked it. But the whole time those three were chattering like starlings. I expected it from Birchfall, and occasionally Whitewing, but Dustpelt skirting his duties to chat? It was...unnerving, to say the least."

Hollypaw shrugged, though she snuck a glance at the three warriors. Whitewing's tail had fallen casually over Birchfalls while they lowered their heads to speak to the older warrior. "Well, Dustpelt is Birchfall's father, right?"

Hazeltail tilted her head. "I can't deny it, but Dustpelt and Birchfall are...very different cats. I don't think I've ever seen them just speaking like this." She shook herself, looking off to the distance in what might have been the warriors only sign of embarrassment. "He talks to me more often, even since I've been a warrior."

"Then maybe Birchfall has some sort of important news?"

"None more important that what we found, I assure you."

Hollypaw pricked her ears. "What news?" She padded forward.

"I would tell you, but you'll know soon enough," Hazeltail meowed, though as she glanced over to Dustpelt again, she paused to consider something. "If they really do have something so important to speak about, perhaps I'd better report it."

Hollypaw nodded eagerly, and watched as Hazeltail turned away and climbed the rocks to Highledge. She was a fairly young warrior, but already dutiful, intelligent, and responsible for reporting to the clan leader. Maybe, before she could become a clan leader or respected senior warrior, it was Hazeltail's position she should be aiming for?

Filing the thought away, Hollypaw turned to stare at the medicine cat's den. I'll just peek in and see if anyone's awake. She padded to the cave and nosed her way through the brambles that covered the entrance. Blinking to adjust to the half-light, she saw Leafpool mixing herbs by a cleft in the rock.

Hollypaw entered the den. "Is that for Cinderpaw?" she whispered.

Leafpool nodded without looking up. "Yes, it is."

"I've come to see her," Hollypaw explained. "Is she awake?"

A croaking mew sounded from a nest in the shadows. "I've been awake for ages." Cinderpaw's voice sounded weak.

Hollypaw hurried over to her friend's nest. The gray apprentice lay awkwardly on the moss, her injured leg sticking out, her eyes dull. Hollypaw gazed anxiously at Leafpool. "Is she okay?"

"She's wrenched the muscles in her leg."

"In that case, she just needs to use it more" Hollypaw mewed brightly. "To build up her strength."

"Easy for you to say," Cinderpaw grumbled. "Getting down to the lake is hard enough, but you've never had to go swimming."

"He's not taking you out until later, is he? If you work it a little now it'll be looser by sun-high. Come on, try stretching it," Hollypaw encouraged. "The sooner you move it around, the better."

Screwing up her face, Cinderpaw struggled to her feet.

"Try putting a little weight on it," Leafpool suggested.

Cinderpaw gingerly pressed her paw to the ground. "Ow!" She flopped back into her nest. "I think I need to stick to the water a while longer."

"Eat these herbs." Leafpool nosed the pile of leaves close to Cinderpaw's face. "I'll fetch some more ointment to soothe the swelling." The medicine cat was frowning. Was she worried, or upset?

As Leafpool padded to the other side of the cave,

Hollypaw decided to try to distract her friend. Should she share what Brambleclaw had told her last night? She's going to find out anyway. "Firestar's giving Poppypaw and Honeypaw their warrior names today."

Cinderpaw turned her head away and closed her eyes.

"It'll be your turn soon," Hollypaw promised.

After a long period of silence, Cinderpaw looked back up, a small smile on her face. "That's great for them. They deserve their warrior names." She purred. "Maybe now we can become warriors together, Hollypaw."

"Yeah," Hollypaw replied, putting a smile on her face that she could only hope wasn't laced with too much pity. "It doesn't matter when you become a warrior, Cinderpaw. I know you'll be a great one." Another silence fell over the two of them as Hollypaw thought about her next question. "Do you think you'll be at the ceremony?"

Cinderpaw thought for a moment, but nodded. "I'll be there. But I think I want to rest until then" Cinderpaw meowed, closing her eyes again.

"Okay." Feeling wretched, Hollypaw padded to the entrance. "Don't forget to eat those herbs!" she called over her shoulder.

Cinderpaw's tail twitched as the only acknowledgement she had heard her friend and Hollypaw pushed her way out through the brambles. As she looked outside, she was met with Jaypaw, who was heading toward the den.

Hollypaw greeted him. "You're up early."

"I've been checking on Millie." He halted beside her. "Were you visiting Cinderpaw?"

"Yes." Hollypaw sighed. "She seems even worse than the last time she hurt her leg."

"She'll feel better once she builds some more strength in her leg."

"Will she be able to walk again?" Hollypaw's ears twitched. She realized with a jolt that she was terrified of the answer.

Jaypaw blinked. "Of course she will! She's only wrenched her leg. She should heal quicker this time. And the swimming is working

well to exercise it without having to put weight on it.."

Is that true? Hollypaw searched his face. "But she's so reluctant to even move. Last time, we could hardly keep her still."

"She's just upset," Jaypaw mewed. "She was so close to making warrior, and now she's got to wait."

"If you're sure..."

"Hollypaw!" Lionpaw's energized mew made her spin around. Her brother's voice came from the center of the clearing. "Firestar's about to give Poppypaw and Honeypaw their warrior names!"

Hollypaw looked up at Highledge and saw Firestar gazing down at the clearing. "Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather together!" he called.

Squirrelflight and Cloudtail were already waiting below Highledge with Honeypaw and Poppypaw. The young cats looked sleek and shiny from close grooming, and their eyes sparkled.

Hollypaw hurried to join Lionpaw at the edge of the clearing. Her paws were tingling. They were only a moon younger than Poppypaw and Honeypaw. It would be their turn next.

"Can you imagine what it feels like to be made a warrior?" she whispered to Lionpaw.

Lionpaw puffed out his chest. "Every cat will take us seriously then," he meowed.

Daisy, with a more swollen belly than Hollypaw had ever seen her with, padded from the nursery and looked hopefully around the camp. Her eyes lit up when she spotted Spiderleg gulping down a mouse beside the halfrock.

He looked up, looking shocked at the fluffy she-cat's attention. "Sorry." He sputtered, hurrying to stand. "I said I would sit with Ashfur." He ran over to the dappled gray warrior who was only just sitting down himself and leaned in to whisper something.

The cream queen's expression fell and she padded to the edge of the clearing. Although, a little levity was brought back into her as Ferncloud and Millie joined her, their voices melding with the cacophony of chatter as the Clan gathered for the naming ceremony.

Mousefur padded stiffly from the elders' den, Longtail beside her. It was hard to tell who was guiding whom. "At this rate, there won't be any apprentices left to fetch moss for my nest," Mousefur complained.

Icekit was padding past the elder and stopped to gaze earnestly up at her. "I'll always fetch you the softest moss, Mousefur," she promised. "Even when I'ma warrior."

Mousefur purred. "Get away with you!" She affectionately shooed the young kit away with her muzzle.

Lionpaw nudged Hollypaw. "Icekit must be crazy."

Hollypaw's whiskers twitched with amusement. "She just doesn't know what apprentice duties are like yet."

Sandstorm and Brightheart had settled in the shadow beneath Highledge. Squirrelflight and Cloudtail nodded a greeting to them. The two mentors had backed away from Poppypaw and Honeypaw, and their fur splayed untidily against the rock face. They clearly wanted to give Sorreltail and Brackenfur room to fuss over their kits.

Sorreltail was giving Poppypaw's ears a fierce lick. "I want you looking nice," she meowed as Poppypaw scooted backward, out of reach.

Brackenfur purred. "She looks fine." His proud gaze switched to Honeypaw. "They both do."

Sorreltail looked at her paws, sadness glazing her eyes. "Molepaw should be here too." Her only tom-kit had died of greencough.

"And Cinderpaw." Birchfall glanced toward the medicine cat den. The brown warrior's whiskers twitched as the brambles at the

entrance stirred, then pricked up as Leafpool emerged with Cinderpaw. Purring, he leaned into Whitewing beside him, his face melting into a bit of relief.

Tail flicking, Sorreltail left her kits and hurried to Leafpool's side. "Is she okay?"

"She's fine," Leafpool assured the other she-cat. "Otherwise I wouldn't have let her come out for this."

To Hollypaw's surprise, Sorreltail nuzzled Leafpool's flank. "It must remind you of Cinderpelt's accident," she murmured.

The medicine cat flinched for a moment at the touch, but her eyes soon grew round, as though she'd never noticed the connection before. She blinked. "That's exactly why I won't let the same thing happen to Cinderpaw."

"I hope Leafpool's right this time," Birchfall muttered to Whitewing.

Whitewing pressed her muzzle against his cheek. "She will be. It'll be Cinderpaw's turn before you know it."

Foxkit still hadn't sat down. "I can't wait till it's my turn!" He was padding excitedly around his sister outside the nursery. "I want to be called Foxcatcher. Do you think we get to choose?"

"Firestar chooses," Icekit mewed. "But I think I'd like Icestorm for my name."

"That's a terrible name." Foxkit whined.

"It is not."

"Is so!"

Ferncloud padded over to her two kits. "Are you arguing again?" She licked Icekit's head, flattening a bit of fur that was sticking up like a tuft of grass.

"Foxpaw started it," Icekit accused.

"I don't care who started it," Ferncloud meowed. "Be quiet and let Firestar speak. You're lucky to even be here, since you aren't apprentices yet"

Icekit looked up in alarm to find Firestar staring sternly down at her. Quickly, she hurried around the edge of the clearing with Foxkit on her tail, all remnants of anger from the fight gone from her face. Hollypaw stifled a purr as Icekit folded her tail over her paws and tried to sit still.

Firestar stepped to the edge of Highledge. "It has been a quarter moon since these she-cats have passed their assessments. We all wish their sister a speedy recovery, and trust in our medicine cats to do the best they can for her." His gaze darkened as he locked eyes with Hazeltail for a moment. "But our neighbors will not wait, and we must show Thunderclan is still strong."

The ginger tom rose his head, lifting it to the sky as he began his speech. "I, Firestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these two apprentices. They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

He bounded down the tumble of rocks and padded to the center of the clearing. Squirrelflight nodded encouragement to Honeypaw, whose eyes were wide with apprehension. Cloudtail nudged Poppypaw forward, and the two apprentices stepped into the clearing.

"Poppypaw and Honeypaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your lives?"

"I do," Honeypaw breathed.

"I do!" Poppypaw's mew nearly drowned out her sister's reply.

Envy made Hollypaw's claws itch. She pushed it away. Not long to wait.

"Then by the power of StarClan I give you your warrior names." He

beckoned Poppypaw with a flick of his tail. She padded toward him, chin high.

Touching his muzzle to her head, Firestar pronounced,

"Poppypaw, from this moment you shall be known as Poppyfrost." He stepped back. "StarClan honors your courage and initiative."

He glanced at Honeypaw, who stepped forward in her turn. "Honeypaw, you shall be known as Honeyfern. StarClan honors your intelligence and kindness." He pressed his nose between her ears.

"Poppyfrost! Honeyfern!" The Clan raised their voices to welcome the new warriors.

"In the tradition of our ancestors, you will guard the camp alone tonight, until dawn."

Hollypaw cheered as loudly as she could, proud of her denmates. But her mew died away as she noticed Honeyfern glance shyly at Berrynose; it was as if she wanted his approval above anyone's.

She hissed into Lionpaw's ear, "I wish Honeypaw—I mean Honeyfern—would stop mooning over that know-it-all!"

Lionpaw snorted. "She'll be worse now that they're sharing a den again."

Hollypaw glanced at her brother, surprised to hear him so scornful. If only Honeyfern were looking at him instead. A relationship with her would tie him tightly to the Clan. And away from Heatherpaw.

"It wouldn't be so bad if Berrynose didn't like her," Lionpaw continued. "Then she could at least move on. But look at that piece of mouse-dung!" Hollypaw followed his gaze, realizing with shock that Berrynose was looking back at the new warrior with a genuine and dopey smile on his face. Oh no. He didn't even seem to be cheering Poppyfrost's name.

As the cheering died away, Firestar lifted his voice once more. "I'm sorry that I cannot give Cinderpaw her warrior name today. But

once her leg has healed, I know the whole Clan will be pleased to welcome her as a warrior."

"Cinderpaw! Cinderpaw!" Honeyfern and Poppyfrost led the cheering this time, and the whole clan joined them. Hollypaw looked over to see Cinderpaw's reaction, noticing in relief that the gray she-cat seemed truly happy to see this. I told you. Your clan knows how good you'll be. Don't lose faith in yourself.

"Brackenfur!" As the cats began to melt away, returning to their duties or to their dens, Firestar called to his deputy. "I need to speak with you once you've finished. Bring Sandstorm, Brambleclaw, Brightheart, and Cloudtail with you." That was a strong patrol.

"Hollypaw!" Lionpaw's voice rang in her ear. "Come on! Let's go congratulate them!"

The black she-cat nodded, padding after her brother towards the new warriors. Brackenfur and Sorreltail were looking on with pride while Berrynose stood beside them, and Hollypaw felt Lionpaw tense beside her. She didn't like him either but it was ridiculous to be filled with anger at just seeing him, especially considering he was a clanmate. Ultimately, they had to protect each other.

"Honeyfern! That's a beautiful name." Berrynose meowed, curling his head around the golden she-cat's neck.

Honeyfern's only response was a purr as she leaned into the touch for a moment and drew back. "I just can't believe I'm finally a warrior."

"Me neither!" Poppyfrost added, pressing happily against her sister's other side as she looked between her and Berrynose.

"We're so proud of you. You've worked very hard for this." Sorreltail meowed happily, pressing against Brackenfur as her face lit up with pride.

Hollypaw dipped her head to the two of them. "You should be proud of your accomplishments too. I'm sure you'll both make great warriors."

Lionpaw flicked his tail over her ear. "Could you sound more boring? They've been our denmates for moons!" He turned to face Poppyfrost. "Nice job Poppyfrost! And you too Honeyfern."

Berrynose barely paid the apprentices a glance. "Did you see that squirrel Honeyfern brought back from her assessment? It was massive!"

"I was kinda more focused on Cinderpaw when their assessment ended." Lionpaw grunted. The cats quieted immediately as he spoke, and one by one they looked to the far end of the clearing where Cinderpaw was padding over.

Honeyfern's expression dropped as she saw the pain in Cinderpaw's eyes. "We're really sorry." She murmured, leaving Berrynose's side to meet her sister.

"We wanted to become warriors with you." Poppyfrost too left the clump of warriors as she came to stand beside Cinderpaw, letting her lean against her to take the weight off her leg. Hollypaw nodded in agreement but didn't want to intrude on the moment, especially considering they had the chance to talk earlier.

Lionpaw looked on sadly at the three of them. "I'm sure you'll be better soon though. Jaypaw said you're doing really well in his swimming thing."

Cinderpaw nodded, although she didn't look especially relieved at the thought. "But at this point it's likely I'll spend the rest of my apprentice days cooped up in the medicine den." Her tail flicked in frustration. Cinderpaw was a talented apprentice, and a good friend. It felt awful to see her struggling like this. "Jaypaw is great company but I don't want to be in there forever. It's just so cramped, and the air is stuffy with all those different herbs."

"Then keep working." The gruff meow of Jaypaw sounded from behind them and Hollypaw realized with a start that her brother had been listening. "You aren't stagnant, Cinderpaw. You might not be training to hunt or fight, but each day you're working to make yourself stronger. That work will pay off."

A bit of hope lit up Cinderpaw's eyes. "I will." She promised, the beginnings of a genuine smile forming on her face. Hollypaw felt a pang of guilt. All she had been able to do was make Cinderpaw feel worse during their whole conversation. Jaypaw, with only a few words, renewed her hope for the future. This wasn't even to mention it was his idea for Cinderpaw to start this swimming exercise. He really does make a better medicine cat than me.

But another thought soon struck her. With Cinderpaw still in the medicine den, Hollypaw realized it would just be her and her brother for a while. It would be strange to have all the empty space especially during the nights when Lionpaw is off with Heatherpaw. She had promised not to tell anyone, but she knew sooner or later her brother would either have to give her up or face consequences other than knowing his sister disapproved. The warrior code couldn't be taken lightly, in personal matters or inter-clan conflict.

Hollypaw looked over to the Highledge. Hazeltail was already there beside Firestar; Sandstorm and Brambleclaw padded beside Brackenfur to join them, with Brightheart and Cloudtail joining soon after. Hollypaw pricked up her ears and leaned forward, her whiskers twitching with worry. Hazeltail's warning flashed in her memory. This is serious news.

"What is it?" Brambleclaw asked.

Firestar's tone was grave. "The dawn patrol picked up WindClan scent on our side of the border again."

Hazeltail nodded. "And this time we found proof that they're not just chasing prey over the border, but killing it there too."

A growl rumbled in Brambleclaw's throat. "Proof?"

"There was squirrel fur and blood at the bottom of a tree inside our territory."

Cloudtail bristled. "How dare they, after the warnings we've already given them?"

"We don't know why they're doing it," Firestar meowed. "But we

must find out before we react."

"It's obvious why they're doing it!" Brambleclaw burst out. "They're greedy."

"We can't be sure of that." Firestar remained calm.

"We should post a patrol at the border," Sandstorm declared, "and attack them next time they cross."

Firestar glanced at his mate, narrowing his eyes. "I know how you feel, Sandstorm. But that's not the best way to deal with this. I want to avoid bloodshed if we can."

Sandstorm's hackles rose. "They're stealing our food!"

"And we're not going to let them get away with it," Firestar insisted. "But there's no point rushing into battle before we know what's going on."

Sandstorm glared back. "Don't you fight anyone anymore?"

"I'll fight if I have to!" Firestar held her gaze. "But I won't spill blood if reason can solve the problem."

"We've tried reasoning with WindClan before," Brambleclaw argued. "You act like they're still our allies."

Firestar shook his head. "I know they stopped being our allies long ago." Wistfulness clouded his gaze. "The Clans are all rivals now."

Hollypaw stared at her leader. Is he remembering the Great Journey? Six cats from the Clans traveled together to save them all. Hollypaw felt a tremor of doubt. Perhaps that journey hadn't been as great as cats made it out to be. Perhaps the blurring of the Clans led to the blurring of borders. And if borders were blurred, how could prey be shared fairly? There had to be rules, or only those who were prepared to fight all the time would survive! That was why StarClan wanted them to live by the warrior code. We need the warrior code as much as we need food and water! Hollypaw dug her claws into the ground. The Clans depended on the code; it was as simple as that.

"So what's your plan?" Brightheart asked, trying to divert the conversation from the feud.

"All I want is for you five to go on a Windclan patrol at sun-hign," Firestar told him. "Wait until a patrol comes. Let them know we have evidence and tell them we're increasing border patrols, and that if we catch any prey-thieves, we'll deal with them, claws unsheathed."

"Very well," Brackenfur agreed. "We'll be there." The deputy dipped his head, though the other patrol members still seemed unsure.

"Maybe we should discuss this further, in private." Brightheart suggested.

Firestar paused a moment but soon stood, flicking his tail to let them know to follow him to his den. One by one, the warriors stood to follow their leader up the rocks and out of sight.

They would be warning Windclan. But did Windclan have an explanation, or a reason for what they had done? Killing prey across the border was undoubtedly against the warrior code, and this wasn't a freak instance. Windclan had been pushing at Thunderclan's border for moons. Brambleclaw and Sandstorm might have a point . But Firestar was a fine leader. He wouldn't let his emotions could his judgement, especially with his warriors around him as advisors. But she couldn't know that. Hollypaw didn't know any of what would happen in that discussion, and shouldn't have expected to. I'm only an apprentice. She thought, sighing as she turned away. But one day, she would be a respected warrior who was allowed to add her own thoughts about border skirmishes. And, just maybe, one day she could be the one to make the final decisions too.

Chapter 19

"That's enough." Jaypaw called. Cinderpaw's breathing had quickened enough and he could feel her thoughts filling up with exhaustion. "We can continue tomorrow."

Cinderpaw could be heard pushing herself up to and onto the shore. Leafpool came up beside her, helping her to get the excess water off. "You can get fully dry when you're back." Her mew became brisk. "You should come back now, before you're too tired to walk back to camp." She turned to Jaypaw. "Bring her back slowly; then get some rest. It's half-moon time, and we're going to the Moonpool tonight."

Jaypaw scrambled upward, his claws scraping on the smooth boulders. A few more tail-lengths and I'll reach the hollow. His paws were aching, heavy as stones, and his head buzzed with tiredness. He had walked Cinderpaw carefully back to camp as Leafpool had asked. She was still limping, but she could walk without help now, and didn't seem to feel a stab of pain at each step like she had when they began.

"Thank you, Jaypaw." Cinderpaw's mew was heartfelt as she settled into her nest. "Being a warrior is so important to me."

Jaypaw nodded. "I know."

"Hurry up!" Leafpool's mew jolted him away. He scrambled over the rim of the hollow, a rush of cool mountain air flattening the fur on his face. Following Leafpool, he padded down the well-trodden path to the Moonpool. As usual, the smooth stone, dimpled by the paw steps of ancient cats, felt warm and comforting beneath his paws.

He was eager to leave camp. He hadn't been away from Cinderpaw for days, and his paws were itching to be on their way to the Moonpool. His mentor had left him behind last time to tend to Cinderpaw's first injury. She would have stayed behind herself if he had been confident she could handle it. But now he would finally

get to a real half-moon gathering.

Leafpool must have sensed his impatience. "Come on," she meowed, leading him through the thorn barrier.

The night felt brittle with cold. Sun-high still lingered with the warmth from green-leaf but at night, the hardened ground drove most creatures into hiding, and Jaypaw's and Leafpool's paw steps were the only movement that disturbed the cold earth. As they neared the WindClan border, Jaypaw sniffed the air. It was tinged with the scent of ShadowClan and RiverClan.

"The others must be waiting," Leafpool observed, picking up the same scents.

Jaypaw followed her out of the forest and padded onto open grass. Moorland lay ahead; he could smell the scent of gorse and heather mingling with cat scent. He recognized Willowpaw and Mothwing from the gathering.

"Hi, Mothwing." Leafpool sounded pleased to see her RiverClan friend.

"Hello, Leafpool," Mothwing purred.

"Is the cold as bad in RiverClan territory as it is here?" Leafpool asked.

"We seem sheltered from the worst of it, but the cold has driven the elders into their den earlier. They're complaining of aching bones."

"You've enough poppy seed?"

"Yes, thank you."

"Hello, Littlecloud," Leafpool greeted the ShadowClan medicine cat. "Is all well with you?"

"It is," Littlecloud answered. The two began chattering about ailments, but Jaypaw's focus was cut off by a soft pelt brushing his. Willowpaw from RiverClan.

"How's Hollypaw?" she asked quietly.

She sounds disappointed to get me instead. Jaypaw flicked his tail. "Didn't you know?" he hissed back. "Hollypaw found it so boring being a medicine cat that she let her poor, useless brother do it instead."

Willowpaw flinched. "I-I already knew she had chosen to be a warrior..."

"I see you're getting to know my new apprentice," Leafpool meowed.

Jaypaw felt the gaze of all four cats burn his pelt.

"This is Jaypaw," Leafpool announced.

Jaypaw stared back, ready to challenge any comment about his blindness.

"Hi, Jaypaw," Mothwing meowed.

"How are you enjoying being an apprentice?" Littlecloud asked.

Jaypaw felt anxiety pulse through his mentor. She's afraid I'm going to say it's boring! "It's great," he replied.

"Jaypaw's a fast learner." Leafpool sounded relieved. "He knows all the herbs already, and he's been a great help with Cinderpaw."

"Really?" Littlecloud was clearly impressed. "Did her leg act up again?"

"I'm afraid so, but it's healing up faster this time."

A new scent caught Jaypaw by surprise. Another cat was hurrying toward them over the WindClan border.

"Barkface!" Littlecloud called to the WindClan medicine cat as he approached. "Where's Kestrelpaw?"

"Just behind me," Barkface panted.

"Hey!" Kestrelpaw exclaimed, seeming to bounce up to the group by the sound of his gait. "Jaypaw! Willowpaw! Nice to see you again."

Jaypaw couldn't help a groan. Kestrelpaw was one of the most airheaded apprentices he had ever met. It was a wonder he managed to keep any herb names in his head.

"Same to you, Kestrelpaw," Willowpaw meowed respectfully.

Before he could say a word, Jaypaw felt fur brush his side. "What do you think we'll see at the Moonpool tonight?" Kestrelpaw murmured. "Maybe Starclan will have a prophecy to share!"

"I suppose we'll see when we get there," he muttered, picking up his pace to get away from the brainless Windclan tom.

"I do hope your clan is doing well," Barkface murmured to Leafpool.

His mentor nodded tursely. "It is, thank you." A tension hung between the medicine cats. Neither of them brought up the tension between their clans at the border, but Jaypaw could tell it was on both of their minds.

"Riverclan has been blessed with plenty of fish this moon," Mothwing added, entirely oblivious to the unrest.

"The moon's rising," Littlecloud observed.

"We'd better hurry if we want to catch it in the Moonpool," Leafpool urged.

Jaypaw followed the cats as they began to climb the slope.

"Willowpaw!" Mothwing called to her apprentice. "Walk with Jaypaw. I'm sure he'll have plenty of questions about the Moonpool."

I've been there before, you know! Jaypaw bit back the words as Willowpaw fell in beside him. I've been an apprentice for moons, I shouldn't be treated like a newborn kit. She kept a wary distance, making sure that her pelt did not touch his.

"Has Leafpool brought you here yet?" she mewed, sounding as if she didn't really want to talk to him.

Jaypaw was about to tell her that he'd traveled there alone when Willowpaw grabbed his scruff without warning and dragged him sideways. He struggled free from her grip and turned on her, lunging at her with unsheathed claws.

"Jaypaw! What are you doing?" Leafpool screeched.

"He almost fell down a rabbit hole!" Willowpaw wailed. "I was just trying to help him."

"Oh! Jaypaw are you okay?" Kestrelpaw squeaked.

Jaypaw let go, shame burning his ears. "I didn't know!" he snapped. Why had she tried to help him? He wasn't a kit!

"Apologize at once," Leafpool ordered.

"But I knew the hole was there!" Jaypaw retorted. It was true. He had smelled the strong scent of rabbit, and his paws had been well aware of the approaching dip. "I didn't need help!"

"That's no excuse," Leafpool hissed. "Apologize!"

"I'm sorry," Jaypaw muttered.

"That's okay," Willowpaw growled. "Next time I hope you fall in!" She padded ahead of him, flicking her tail past his nose.

"I still think you're great," Kestrelpaw whispered, falling in beside him despite Jaypaw's best efforts. I don't look down on any cat just because they're blind or mean! I'm a real medicine cat! His thoughts were filled with so much pride, as though this were an accomplishment worth being proud of.

"Keep up, Jaypaw!" He felt the flash of Leafpool's angry gaze as she glanced back at him. It wasn't his fault. Willowpaw had started it! He padded after Willowpaw, ignoring the trail of resentment she left in her wake, and concentrated on the older cats' conversation.

"This early frost is damaging many of the leaves," Barkface commented.

"We'll need to stock up quickly before leaf-bare," Littlecloud agreed. "I was hoping to give them some more time so they would last longer but that doesn't seem an option now."

"There are a couple of sheltered spots in RiverClan territory where the herbs are safe from damage," Mothwing told them.

Jaypaw strained to hear more. He wanted to know the location of every plant that could be of use to his Clan, no matter where. He was listening so hard that he didn't hear the stream, or notice the ground turn from grass to rock beneath his paws as they approached it. The freezing air had turned the stone to ice, and suddenly his paws slipped from under him.

Willowpaw lunged toward him, then stopped as though claws had grabbed her tail. She watched Jaypaw slither ungracefully onto his side and waited without saying a word as, hot with embarrassment, he struggled to his paws. Then she padded on, not even slowing down as he limped after her. Jaypaw felt a flash of admiration at her stubborn refusal to help.

She offered him no help as he scrambled up the steep ridge either, though he could sense anxiety sparking from her as she watched him haul himself up the perilous rocks. He was relieved that he had made the climb before and knew the route well. He paused at the top, listening for the voices that had guided him last time. But the only sound was the wind spiraling into the hollow and the trickling of water as it echoed around the rocks. He padded down the paw-dimpled stone to the Moonpool, stopping when he felt cold water lap the tips of his paws.

The cats fanned out around the edge of the Moonpool, Jaypaw padding in Leafpool's paw steps until she settled at the far side. He sat down beside her, eager to touch his nose to the water. Jaypaw lifted his muzzle. Another cat was bristling with anticipation. Mothwing.

The RiverClan medicine cat cleared her throat. "Before we share

dreams with StarClan, I wish to give Willowpaw her full Clan name."

"Already?" Willowpaw was thrilled. "Oh, wow! How can I thank you, Mothwing?"

"You have earned your name," Mothwing replied gently. "This is nothing but what you deserve."

"Only thanks to you," Willowpaw mewed. "You've been a great mentor."

"And I hope I shall continue to be so."

Jaypaw knew that Willowpaw would be an apprentice to Mothwing for as long as the RiverClan medicine cat lived, but her new name would give her a respect and status in her Clan she had not had before. His tail twitched. How long before Leafpool gave him his Clan name? It would probably be long after his siblings had gotten theirs.

Then a thought crossed his mind: Leafpool had warned him before the meeting that Mothwing didn't believe in Starclan, and that I shouldn't mention it. But how could Mothwing perform the naming ceremony in that case?

Leafpool's whiskers brushed his cheek as she leaned close. "StarClan will hear her, even though she refuses to hear them."

Jaypaw gasped. "How—"

"I know you better than you think, Jaypaw," Leafpool purred.

Jaypaw pulled away. He didn't like the idea that his mentor could second-guess his thoughts.

Mothwing began the ceremony. "I, Mothwing, medicine cat of RiverClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on this apprentice. She has trained hard to understand the way of a medicine cat, and with your help she will serve her Clan for many moons."

Was it his imagination or did the starlight feel warm on his pelt? Jaypaw closed his eyes and focused on Willowpaw. A swell of joyous thoughts flooded through her.

"Willowpaw, do you promise to uphold the ways of a medicine cat, to stand apart from rivalry between Clan and Clan, and to protect all cats equally, even at the cost of your life?"

"I do." Stars swirled in Willowpaw's mind.

"Then by the powers of StarClan I give you your true name as a medicine cat. Willowpaw, from this moment you will be known as Willowshine. StarClan honors your loyalty and your compassion. May you use them to serve your Clan for endless moons."

Jaypaw heard Willowshine's tongue lap Mothwing's fur.

"Willowshine! Willowshine!" Leafpool, Barkface, Kestrelpaw, and Littlecloud raised their voices to Silverpelt.

"Willowshine!" Jaypaw joined them after a moment, not wanting another scolding from Leafpool.

Jaypaw heard the Moonpool ripple as Willowshine's paw tips touched the water's edge.

"Thank you—all of you," she meowed. "My paws were guided by StarClan in everything I have done, and I hope they will continue to guide me for the rest of my life."

"May StarClan grant that it is so," murmured Barkface.

"Congratulations, Willowshine," Leafpool meowed warmly.

"Well done," Littlecloud purred. He lay down beside the Moonpool. "StarClan will be eager to share tongues with you, I'm sure."

"And you as well, Jaypaw." Leafpool cut in, turning her head to fact the sky. "StarClan! I bring you Jaypaw, my apprentice, and pray you accept him as you once accepted me."

Fur brushed stone as the other cats followed his lead and lay down

to share dreams with StarClan. Jaypaw rested his belly on the cool rock. He touched his nose to the chilly water, and his mind instantly filled with lush greenery as he entered StarClan's hunting grounds. He blinked, adjusting to the shock of sight, letting his eyes get used to the chaotic colors until they fell into shapes he could recognize. Trees soared around him, their green leaves trembling against a bright blue sky. There was no hint of crisp leaf-fall in the air here, only trees in full leaf and undergrowth burgeoning with life.

Does it look like this to Willowshine? he wondered. He pricked his ears, listening for her. Do we share the same forest when we dream? Sniffing, he searched for her scent and it appeared on the breeze, almost as if he had drawn it to him. He padded quietly toward her, keeping low, somehow aware that he was trespassing.

"Mudfur?" her soft voice was calling.

Jaypaw peered over the root of an oak and saw her gazing around a clearing. She was smaller than he had imagined. Her body was sleek and lithe, and her tabby markings were hardly more than delicate stripes along her pelt.

"Yes, little one?" A mottled tom padded out from the ferns and greeted her, touching his muzzle to hers.

Jaypaw ducked down.

"It is good to see you, Mudfur," Willowshine mewed.

"You dealt well with Dapplepaw's stomach ache."

"Was I right to give her reassurance rather than herbs?" Willowshine sounded anxious.

"Yes. She got better on her own, and the herbs can be saved for a cat with greater need," Mudfur praised her.

Jaypaw peeped over the root again. Willowshine was flicking her tail happily. "Have you news to share with RiverClan?" she asked.

"Beware the Twolegs upstream. Their kits are trying to block the

water that feeds the Clan."

"I'll warn Mothwing," Willowshine promised.

Jaypaw's whiskers tingled. Of course Mudfur could only speak with Mothwing through Willowshine. Was the she-cat's stubbornness so strong that even Starclan couldn't break through to her? Maybe he could find wherever she was dreaming. He opened his mouth to taste the air, searching out Mothwing's scent.

He smelled nothing. Willowshine's scent had disappeared, as though her dream had slipped from his paws. He tried to draw Mothwing's scent to him, as he had done with Willowshine, but nothing came. He closed his eyes and allowed the forest to slide from his consciousness, letting himself fall back to the hollow. When he opened his eyes, the Moonpool was shining far below him. He could see the other cats still sleeping around the pool—including him. Mothwing was breathing more heavily than the others, her body twitching while the others lay motionless.

Closing his eyes, Jaypaw focused on her mind, willing himself into her thoughts. He smelled prey, and then water, and opened his eyes to find himself among reeds at the edge of a lake. Mothwing was a few tails ahead of him, stalking a frog. She pounced on it as it hopped, then let it go and watched it hop again, her whiskers twitching with amusement as it struggled clumsily among the reeds. fluttered above her head, and she sprang up and grabbed it from the air, holding it close so that its wings tickled her nose.

This was the shore of the lake that stretched between ThunderClan and RiverClan. It was true. The RiverClan medicine cat was dreaming the ordinary dreams of any Clan cat.

"Spottedleaf was right." A rasping purr sounded from the long grass beside him. The grass quivered as a disheveled she-cat padded out. Her long, pale fur was matted in places, and her paw steps were heavy.

"What did Spottedleaf say?" he asked.

"She warned me not to leave you to your own devices too long."

"I wasn't doing anything," he mewed defensively.

"I've lived long enough to learn the look of mischief on a kit's face," she grunted.

"I'm not a kit!" Jaypaw retorted.

"At my age, you all appear like kits." The old cat's mew croaked with amusement.

"Who are you?" he meowed.

"Yellowfang. I was ThunderClan's medicine cat before Cinderpelt. You've heard of Cinderpelt, I assume?"

"Of course," Jaypaw mewed, lifting his chin. "Leafpool wouldn't stop talking about her." He narrowed his eyes. "Have you seen her?" Maybe he could get Cinderpelt herself to tell Leafpool how foolish she was being.

"Yes, I've seen her," Yellowfang answered. "But I didn't come here to talk about Cinderpelt." She cleared her throat. "You're trying to walk in other cats' dreams, aren't you?"

"So what if I am?"

"You should be careful," she warned. "A cat with big ears sometimes hears more than he should."

"And who decides what I should and should not hear?" Jaypaw countered.

"You do." Yellowfang's gaze burned into his. "But you are young, and curiosity can be dangerous. Be careful where you tread."

Jaypaw bristled. Why was this old fleabag telling him what to do? "Leafpool knows I can walk in other cats' dreams," he snapped. "She told me it was a special gift."

"It is," Yellowfang agreed.

"Then why shouldn't I use it?"

"You have claws?" Yellowfang's eyes glinted as she asked him the question.

"Of course!"

"Then why don't you silence me by shredding me with them?"

What a stupid question. "You're a member of StarClan!" he retorted. "I wouldn't attack you."

"Why not?"

"It would be wrong!" What did she think he was? A weasel? "You're my ancestor and my elder—"

"And I'm three times your size." Amusement rumbled once more in Yellowfang's mew.

Jaypaw stared at her. What was she trying to say?

"There are many reasons why we don't use every power we have. Sometimes the warrior code guides us, sometimes instinct, sometimes common sense." She leaned closer toward Jaypaw, and he tried not to shrink away from her stale breath. "You have a remarkable gift, Jaypaw, but you must think before you use it."

Was she calling him stupid? Jaypaw lashed his tail mutinously.

Yellowfang narrowed her eyes and sighed. "Kits!" she muttered. "I'm wasting my breath." She turned, disappearing into the undergrowth before he could speak.

Jaypaw itched with crossness. There was so much he wanted to know; why couldn't StarClan just be open with him? Well, he decided, if the answers are there to be discovered, I'll discover them! He padded through the trees, trying to draw the scent of another medicine cat to him.

The forest morphed around him, fading into a glade dappled with flowers amongst the soft grass. Leafpool stood in the center, looking around for whoever she was supposed to meet. Please be here! She seemed to scream, though her posture remained neutral.

The moment of silence hung so long that Jaypaw considered bursting in and making his appearance known, but before he could follow through a gray she-cat entered the clearing. Cinderpelt , he thought, recognizing her immediately. Maybe his mentor would finally be able to put her fears to rest.

"Hello, Leafpool." The she-cat meowed. Her blue eyes sparkled with a mix of emotions, but she didn't voice any of them as she sat down in front of Leafpool. "I gather you wanted to speak with me."

"Y-Yes." The stern tone that was often in Leafpool's voice had vanished. Her form collapsed into the slinking position of a young apprentice who failed their first mission. "I'm sorry." She cried. "I'm sorry I couldn't heal her."

"She is already healing." Cinderpelt responded, keeping her head high. "What still worries you?"

"My apprentice is the one who is helping her." Leafpool confessed. "I didn't do well enough the first time and sent her out to get injured again. I nearly cost her her future." The brown tabby lifted her gaze to look at her old mentor, the guilt evidence in her eyes. "She nearly ended up like you, and she wouldn't even be able to train as a medicine cat since I already have Jaypaw."

Cinderpelt had stayed stoic as Leafpool spoke, but as she finished the gray she-cat stood taller, her eyes narrowing. "She wouldn't want to be a medicine cat." She stated it bluntly, leaving no possibility for her to be wrong. "If you had ever thought to ask her, or even talk to her, you might know that."

"You trained as a warrior first too but-"

"But she isn't me." Cinderpelt cut her off, taking a moment of pause to calm herself before she continued. "Cinderpaw was named after me, and in a few ways, she resembles me, but we are not the same cat. Her being able to live her life, as a warrior given what she wants, will not change what happened to me."

Leafpool looked more vulnerable than Jaypaw had ever seen her. It was strange to see his mentor not be the highest authority in the

room. "I just want her to have a better life than you. You weren't meant to be a medicine cat. You didn't even have a natural connection with Starclan! Remember the prophecy about Brambleclaw and-"

"I remember well enough." Cinderpelt's mew was curt at first, but her gaze softened as she stepped forward to lay her tail on her former apprentice's shoulder. "It's true I may not have been born to be a medicine cat, but it was still my choice. I saw that it was a job I could do, and one I enjoyed doing. Yellowfang offered the position when she saw I was happy, not because it was where my life was forced to go."

"That's why you didn't take Starclan's offer when you died?"

The gray medicine cat dipped her head in acceptance, a smile forming on her face. "Of course. I enjoyed my life. There's no reason I would ask for another, when I could allow a new cat to enjoy her life on her own."

The two she-cats embraced, pressing their heads against each others' necks. This is what it took, Jaypaw thought. But just to be sure... Jaypaw stepped out from the bushes where he had been hiding. "Cinderpelt's life is over, Leafpool. It can't be changed. But back in the waking world, there's a young she-cat sitting in the medicine den whose life not only can be changed, but is changing. That's why I'm working to save her." Jaypaw padded forward, meeting his mentor face to face. "You could help her too, if you wanted."

Leafpool's eyes lit up with surprise and her traditional stern disappointment for a moment before it softened. "I know." She murmured. "I will, I promise."

"And maybe you need to let someone else back into your life." Cinderpelt added. "You've been stuck following me for so long that you've lost the rest of your clanmates."

Sorreltail . The name burned in both medicine cats' minds simultaneously. Maybe Leafpool getting a friend back was what she needed so she could talk about her problems before they blew up in

her face.

Cinderpelt turned her head to look at Jaypaw, her eyes remaining calm. I knew you were there the whole time. She seemed to purr in amusement as she looked at him, but her mouth didn't move. Thank you for helping Cinderpaw, Jaypaw. You'll make a fine medicine cat.

"Jaypaw?"

He felt a muzzle nudging his shoulder.

"It's time to wake up." Leafpool's warm breath ruffled his fur.

He opened his eyes to darkness. The forest was gone and the Moonpool lapped at his paws. He could hear the other cats stirring. Littlecloud and Barkface were padding around the Moonpool, while Leafpool stood quietly at his side. Mothwing was yawning on the other side of the Moonpool, as though she had enjoyed her sleep. Willowshine's excitement suddenly flitted across the Moonpool, breaking his concentration like a warm breeze disturbing fallen leaves. I bet she's dying to pass on Mudfur's message. He felt her curious stare graze his pelt, and wondered if she had noticed him eavesdropping in her dream. He turned away from her quickly.

"Come on, Willowshine!" Mothwing called. "It's too cold to hang around."

"We should get home," Leafpool meowed. She turned and followed Barkface and Littlecloud to the top of the ridge. Jaypaw padded after her. At the top he glanced backward, finding only stillness and silence. The cats padded down the trail in silence, each cat caught up in thoughts about their dreams. Eventually, the hard stone beneath Jaypaw's paws faded into a grassy path.

"Good-bye," Littlecloud meowed as he turned toward the lake.

"See you at the Gathering," Mothwing added, dipping her head to Leafpool.

"Travel carefully," Leafpool called as Littlecloud, Mothwing, and Willowshine headed lakeward together.

Barkface crossed the border into his own territory, leading a reluctant Kestrelpaw back with him. "Take care," he meowed.

"And you," Leafpool responded.

Jaypaw heard the heather rattle as the WindClan cat hurried home. Left alone with Leafpool, Jaypaw was aware that the air had grown colder. He fluffed out his pelt.

He padded beside Leafpool into the forest. Her thoughts were once again as guarded as ever, but she seemed softer somehow, more content. "Thank you." She meowed finally as they were about to arrive."

"I tried to tell you earlier." He muttered. "Apparently you needed your mentor to get it through your head."

"No." She responded, holding him back from the entrance with her tail. "Thank you for helping Cinderpaw. I should have been there for her too, but I'm glad she had someone who could truly help her." Jaypaw felt her nose touch his forehead. "Thank you for becoming a medicine cat."

With that his mentor turned around, letting him follow her into camp. As Jaypaw followed her through he felt a swell of happy thoughts and huffed. Leafpool had never made her thoughts that obvious before. But after a moment alone, the thought still lingered. Maybe being a medicine cat isn't so bad after all.

Chapter 20

Lionpaw awoke to the now familiar scent of decaying leaves. The thick fog blanketing the forest floor made it seem even darker than it already was with the impenetrable barrier of trees. For once, Tigerstar didn't seem to be around. "Hello?" He called.

His cry echoed out through the trees, bouncing back and quieting for several heartbeats before it faded into silence.

Where could he be? Lionpaw thought, straining his eyes to look as far as he could. Come to think of it, where was anyone? In all the nights he and Tigerstar had trained, he had never seen another cat here. Well, if he's not here... Lionpaw stepped out of the clearing, picking up speed as he raced through the forest. The trees flashed by him as the paths diverged and disappeared. It wasn't an easy place to navigate, but he didn't have anywhere specific to be. He just wanted to find someone.

"Are you lost?" A voice sounded from behind Lionpaw. He thought for a moment it was Tigerstar but it was too high pitched to be him, and as Lionpaw turned around the tom who faced him had blue eyes instead of amber.

Lionpaw surveyed the tom. He was a brown tabby like Tigerstar, and had a similar build, but this definitely wasn't his mentor. "Who are you?" He asked.

The tabby tom narrowed his eyes. "I don't answer to you. But you are going to answer my question now. Are you lost?"

"Why would I be lost? I was just exploring." Lionpaw growled, puffing up his chest. This cat was acting like he was a wandering kit. He was invited to be here. But a thought struck him. Was Lionpaw even allowed to be in this place, or had Tigerstar snuck him in?

The tom looked put off for a moment by his words. "I didn't call..."

but as he trailed off he shook his head and locked his gaze back on Lionpaw. "Why did you come here?" He growled.

"I was looking for someone." Lionpaw raised his head to match his adversary. He hadn't realized how much he had filled out, standing next to a massive tom like Tigerstar, but next to this cat he looked almost full grown.

"Who?"

Lionpaw wondered if he should say. Would this cat even know Tigerstar if he tried to explain? He shook the thought away. They lived in the same place, and Lionpaw did need to find him. "Tigerstar."

Immediately the tabby's frosty blue eyes widened and he took a step back. "T-Ti..." He trailed off, jerking his head around the clearing to look in every direction. And, as if called by name, from behind the tom came his imposing brown mentor.

"Lionpaw." Tigerstar's deep voice resonated as he stepped past the other tabby and up to his apprentice. "What are you doing here?"

What was he talking about? "I came in for training and you weren't there!" Lionpaw wasn't going to be blamed for Tigerstar's absence. "When I went looking for you I found this tom."

Tigerstar finally looked back at the cat he had walked past. His eyes narrowed as he stared at the other cat and it seemed he was staring back. Do they know each other? They must. A moment of silence passed before Tigerstar turned back to him. "Well it seems you've done something right," he meowed, going to stand beside Hawkfrost. "Lionpaw, this is Hawkfrost, my son."

His son? "But I thought that was Brambleclaw!" Hawkfrost was that Riverclan cat who died on Thunderclan territory.

Tigerstar dipped his head. "Your father is one of my sons, but not the only one. Unfortunately my other son didn't live to see your birth." Tigerstar had a son in Riverclan? Lionpaw had never heard about Hawkfrost coming from Thunderclan, or even Shadowclan

originally. But maybe that was why he died on Thunderclan territory!

"Then why are you surprised?" Lionpaw asked Hawkfrost. "Didn't Tigerstar tell you about me?" Did Tigerstar do this for so many apprentices he'd forgotten to mention Lionpaw? Maybe he wasn't the special apprentice he thought he was.

Hawkfrost was about to respond when Tigerstar put a tail in front of him. "We haven't been able to see each other since his death. But I do believe you've helped us solve that problem, Lionpaw."

"How?"

"You said you were looking for Tigerstar," Hawkfrost cut in. "Are you sure that was all you were looking for when you found me?"

Lionpaw thought back, and shook his head. "I guess not. After a while I just wanted to find someone else. Tigerstar didn't seem to be there and I hadn't ever had the chance to meet someone else in this place."

"That would mean..." Hawkfrost murmured something under his breath, but Tigerstar shot him a glare before he could continue. What had Lionpaw done? Were they saying he had brought Hawkfrost to them?

"I believe we may be able to alter the format of your training." Tigerstar looked between Hawkfrost and Lionpaw, letting the suspense build before he continued. "From now on, both of us will meet you. I'm sure Hawkfrost will be able to add valuable input, and it give me the chance to see your fighting from the outside." Two mentors? Hawkfrost was his kin too, and he had heard the older warriors mention a couple times that he was pretty strong. Now he'd definitely be able to show the clan how serious he was about being a warrior.

"That sounds great!" He meowed happily.

"Well then," Tigerstar looked to Hawkfrost, indicating he should move behind Lionpaw. "Let's begin."

"Harder!" Hawkfrost growled. "The faster you can throw me off, the faster you can face another opponent."

Lionpaw narrowed his gaze, drawing back his paw and hammering it down in a swipe as hard as he could make it. There was a log behind him, Lionpaw noticed. At the last moment, the blow slowed. Hawkfrost's head was pushed to the side but his stance was steady.

"Stop." Tigerstar cut in. He lifted a tail to make Hawkfrost back off, though he didn't move from his position at the edge of the clearing. "What is this about Lionpaw? This hesitancy doesn't suit a strong cat like you."

Lionpaw's face flushed with embarrassment. The possibility of his enemy getting hurt shouldn't have been on his mind. "Cinderpaw was hurt during her assessment." He began, glancing over to Tigerstar to be sure this was alright. "Her sisters became warriors today, without her. I'm just scared of that happening to anyone else."

"Like you?" Hawkfrost meowed, coming over to sit beside Lionpaw and lay his tail on his back.

"Personally," Tigerstar left his spot for the first time since the training began to come sit across from his kin. "I believe this is an opportunity to learn a lesson. What happened to Cinderpaw is awful, I agree. Even if you do your best, sometimes bad circumstances will simply come, and may hold you back from doing what you imagined you would." The massive tabby bowed his head until it was level with Lionpaw's. "So you had better make use of the time you're given now."

Hawkfrost nodded in agreement. "Exactly. I had no idea I would die when I did, but in the time I had I became stronger and well respected enough to become Riverclan's deputy, if temporarily." Lionpaw had never heard about Hawkfrost being a deputy, but that meant he was training with a deputy and a clan leader! He couldn't fail. Hawkfrost saw his expression and narrowed his eyes. "Good fortune won't just come for you, Lionpaw, even training with us. You need to make things happen."

Lionpaw stood, a smile returning to his face. Make things happen. He couldn't keep dragging his feet. "I'm going to become the best warrior in the clan." He resolved.

Tigerstar let out a huff of amusement. "With our help, yes."

And as a strong and respected warrior, he'd be able to stop the battle with Windclan! He and Heatherpaw would never have to fight. That was another thing he had to make happen, he realized. Somehow, he would find a way to make a relationship with Heatherpaw work.

Lionpaw stretched sitting down with a mouse and his brother as he readied himself for training. Whatever Ashfur had for him, he was confident he could do it perfectly today.

"Just don't get cocky." Jaypaw grumbled. "Cats who hold their heads too high won't see the cliff fall under their paws."

Lionpaw looked back at his brother, a little surprised at how closely Jaypaw had guessed his thoughts about the day. "I'll be careful!" He promised, tucking back into his mouse.

"Hi, Jaypaw, Lionpaw." Hollypaw was bounding across the clearing to join them. "Any food left?"

"You can eat later, Hollypaw!" Thornclaw was pacing up and down in front of the camp entrance. "Training first."

Lionpaw gulped down the last of his mouse, feeling a twinge of jealousy. Thornclaw took Hollypaw out on dawn patrols nearly every morning. That was probably how she had so quickly caught up to him. Ashfur seemed to only go out with him for training or a patrol once a day. But I've got three mentors now! he thought with satisfaction. He wouldn't be behind for much longer.

He got to his paws and hurried toward Thornclaw. Ashfur bounded across the clearing to join them.

"I was really hoping to get a mouse at least" Hollypaw muttered, catching up.

"We'll hunt after battle training," Thornclaw promised. "Ashfur and I just wanted to get you out while it's cold so you can warm up your muscles."

The golden warrior darted through the tunnel. Lionpaw fell in beside Ashfur, leaving Hollypaw to hurry after them. They padded to the training hollow in silence. Sun was slanting through the bright green leaves, and the air crackled with the frost of late leaf-fall. A single bird call broke the silence. Lionpaw saw Hollypaw lick her lips.

Ashfur sat down in the center of the hollow, his tail whisking over the mossy ground. "Before we begin with today's lesson, we'd like to make sure you're both warmed up."

Thornclaw dipped his dead to the other mentor, continuing the thought. "With that in mind, we'd like you to spar. You can use any of the moves you've learned so far. We'll determine when the battle is over."

Hollypaw padded up to stand across from Lionpaw. If she was still distracted by hunger, she wasn't showing it.

"Get ready Lionpaw." Ashfur's dark blue eyes bore into him until he readied himself to leap.

"Alright...go!" Thornclaw called, whipping his tail to the ground to indicate they should start.

Lionpaw leaped and twisted in the air, diving forward as he landed with his claws raking the ground. Perfect! In battle, that would have beaten even the fastest ShadowClan warrior. Did you see how well I made the turn, Tigerstar? Tigerstar and Hawkfrost had only shown him the move the previous night. Lionpaw had mastered it quickly. Having two, well, three mentors was the best!

He felt Hollypaw fall beneath his paws, and tried to bear down on her paws to keep her in the pin. The black she-cat wriggled forcefully for a few moments before she relaxed. Ha! Gotcha! He looked over to Ashfur and Thornclaw, expecting them to declare his quick victory. But Thornclaw's expression remained neutral and a

small smile crossed Ashfur's face. Suddenly he felt a huge surge of energy from under him as Hollypaw threw him off her, sending him crashing into a tree. He heard a branch break behind him as Hollypaw and Thornclaw ran over to check on him.

"Are you alright?" Thornclaw asked firmly.

Lionpaw surveyed his body. He was definitely surprised by the move and the resulting impact, but it didn't seem like there was any damage. "I'm fine." He responded.

"You managed to break a tree branch." Ashfur cut in, tilting his head to look at the tree behind him. "Looks like a pretty thick one too."

"I didn't think I had thrown him that hard." Hollypaw murmured. Lionpaw couldn't quiet tell if her hesitant tone was out of shock or modesty.

"Maybe I'm just too strong for that tree!" He shot back. It didn't have to be all about Hollypaw. He had done a perfect move to start off the battle.

Ashfur huffed in amusement. "Sure."

Thornclaw raised an eyebrow in suspicion, but didn't comment. "If you are truly unharmed Lionpaw, I think we should begin the lesson."

Lionpaw nodded, going to sit beside Hollypaw in front of their mentors. This was supposed to be his day to show how much he had improved. He wasn't going to let Hollypaw be the prized student again.

Ashfur opened his mouth to begin, but before he could heavy pawsteps were heard passing the clearing. A brown tabby pelt flashed through the leaves. Tigerstar? Had his other mentor come to watch him train?

His suspicions were proven wrong as his father stepped into the clearing. They really did look similar though, at a glance.

"Hello Brambleclaw," Thornclaw greeted politely.

"Thornclaw," Brambleclaw responded. "I see you're training Lionpaw and Hollypaw together today. May I watch?"

"I don't see why not."

Ashfur let out a snort as Brambleclaw sat down. "Thornclaw, you don't think it's weird for another random warrior to sit in and watch apprentice training?"

Thornclaw dipped his head. "Perhaps, but he's their father, not a random warrior. I imagine he'd be interested in seeing how his kits are doing."

"I won't get in the way." Brambleclaw added.

Ashfur narrowed his eyes, but didn't say anything more to the tom. "Today," he began, "we're going to be thinking about how other Clans fight—their strengths and weaknesses, and the best way to exploit them."

"So, what strengths do the other Clans have?" Thornclaw prompted.

"RiverClan can swim," Hollypaw mewed, "which means they can approach from water."

"WindClan is well camouflaged and small, so they are hardest to detect," Lionpaw offered.

"Unless they're upwind," Hollypaw pointed out, "in which case their rabbity scent gives them away."

Lionpaw bristled with indignation. Heatherpaw didn't smell rabbity.

"What about ShadowClan?" Ashfur asked.

"They have the least grasp on morality," Hollypaw growled, "so you never know how low they'll stoop in any attack. That makes them unpredictable."

"And weaknesses?" Thornclaw pressed.

"ShadowClan is weak because they think they are braver than they actually are," Hollypaw mewed. "And RiverClan is so well fed that they're slower than us."

Lionpaw shifted on his paws, searching for something to say. Hollypaw was answering everything first. Tigerstar and Hawkfrost had trained him in battle moves, not quiz questions. He snuck a look at his father, but couldn't read his expression. He had to find some way to impress him!

Ashfur glanced at him. "What about WindClan?"

Lionpaw's mouth turned dry. Ashfur's gaze seemed to be boring into him. Had Hollypaw broken her promise and told his mentor about his meetings with Heatherpaw? Lionpaw started to panic as he realized that all three cats were staring at him, waiting for his answer. His paws began to itch. Come on! I know this! I'll show her! "WindClan is fast, but not as strong as us because they don't have any trees to climb on the moorland," he growled, glaring at her.

Brambleclaw smiled at him, nodding in encouragement.

"Good." Thornclaw nodded. "You seem to know the basics. Let's practice some moves. First, let's try one that will work on a RiverClan cat." Finally, something he was prepared for.

Thornclaw darted under Ashfur's belly and nipped him on his hind leg. Ashfur rounded on him ready for the counterattack, but Thornclaw had already shot out of reach.

Ashfur leaped toward him but Thornclaw rolled out of the way, sprang to his paws and launched himself onto Ashfur's back, unbalancing the gray warrior and sending him rolling onto his side. The two warriors jumped to their paws, shook the earth from their pelts, and turned to face their apprentices.

"Now you two try it," Ashfur meowed.

"Lionpaw." Thornclaw flicked his tail towards the young tom. "You will be the RiverClan cat first, because you're bigger and more powerful. Hollypaw, you try and unbalance him like I did with

Ashfur."

Hollypaw nodded. "Don't make it easy for me!" Her eyes were shining with determination.

"Don't worry, I won't," Lionpaw hissed through gritted teeth.

He felt her dart underneath him, felt her teeth graze his hind leg. But he wasn't going to let her get away as easily as Ashfur had done. He dropped his whole weight onto her before she could scamper free, then grasped her with his paws and tugged her over onto her side.

"Hey!" she squealed. "That's not how you're meant to do it!"

"You should have been faster!" Lionpaw spat, and began raking her spine with his hind claws while he gripped her shoulders with his forepaws.

"You're hurting me!" Hollypaw shrieked, struggling to free herself.

"Lionpaw, stop!" Thornclaw's sharp command made Lionpaw freeze. Hollypaw slid from his grip and scrambled to her paws. Hollypaw's mentor was staring down at Lionpaw, his dark green eyes blazing. "This is training! We don't want any cat hurt!"

Brambleclaw raced over as well, immediately checking over his daughter with wide eyes.

Lionpaw got to his paws. "Sorry," he mewed. "I got carried away."

Hollypaw was lapping at the scratches Lionpaw had given her. He felt a wave of guilt for letting his temper get away from him. He hung his head. "Sorry, Hollypaw," he murmured. The rage that had been seething in his belly all morning faded away. "I'm really sorry." He glanced nervously at his mentor, expecting anger, but Ashfur was just watching as Thornclaw helped Hollypaw up.

"Will you two be able to work with just Hollypaw this morning?" The brown tabby directed his request at Ashfur and Brackenfur as he moved away from Hollypaw, allowing her mentor to take over the care. "I'd like to take Lionpaw hunting."

"He is my apprentice." Ashfur meowed pointedly.

Thornclaw let his tail fall on Ashfur's shoulder. "It is unconventional. But he's their father. I believe this duty can be performed adequately by him."

Ashfur looked as though he was going to respond again, but decided against it. He flicked his tail in reluctant acceptance, letting Brambleclaw go.

His pelt burning with shame, Lionpaw followed his father out of the training hollow. He braced himself for a lecture, but Brambleclaw only padded silently through the trees.

"I shouldn't have let my temper get the better of me," Lionpaw blurted out, deciding to get straight to the point. "But she's been bugging me all morning."

Still Brambleclaw said nothing.

"I know that's no excuse," Lionpaw went on. "It won't ever happen again."

"I know," Brambleclaw meowed. He stopped and gazed at Lionpaw. "It's so unlike you." The tabby warrior sighed. "I've always relied on you to take care of your littermates."

Lionpaw hung his head. He had let his father down.

"Is something worrying you?" Brambleclaw asked.

"Something . . ." The tabby warrior paused. " . . . troubling you?" he meowed at last.

Lionpaw knew he couldn't tell his father about Heatherpaw and how it seemed like Hollypaw was constantly ready to spill his secret to the clan. "It's just . . ." He trailed off. How could he explain his anger? "It feels like Hollypaw doesn't trust me to be a loyal warrior."

Brambleclaw nodded. "I know what that's like." He began padding through the trees again. Puzzled, Lionpaw hurried after him.

"Being Tigerstar's son has meant I've had to win the trust of every ThunderClan cat over and over," Brambleclaw went on quietly. "So I know how frustrating it is when you have to prove something that shouldn't need proving."

The leafy forest floor sloped upward before them and they sank their claws into the sweet-smelling earth to help them climb. Lionpaw knew just how many terrible stories there were about Tigerstar. Ferncloud threatened he and his siblings with him whenever they were getting out of hand. Lionpaw could only imagine how hard it must have been for Thunderclan to see his father like that too, when he didn't do anything.

"The trouble is that everyone only saw evil in Tigerstar. They forgot what a bold and brilliant warrior he was."

Lionpaw pricked his ears. Was Brambleclaw defending Tigerstar? Maybe at some point, Tigerstar had helped him too. It would make sense, since Brambleclaw was his son and Tigerstar would know what it was like to be alienated by cats you considered your friends.

"I haven't forgotten how Tigerstar betrayed his Clan," Brambleclaw meowed, as if he had noticed Lionpaw's surprise. "But we all have strengths and weaknesses. It must be sad to be remembered only for your weaknesses. I hope I'll be remembered for my strengths instead."

"Of course you will be," Lionpaw mewed. His fur prickled at the thought of his father being nothing but a memory. "Every cat in the Clan respects you."

"I wish that were true."

"What do you mean?"

"I think there may be one Clanmate who wishes me harm."The words came in a whisper.

Lionpaw's heart lurched. "Who?"

Brambleclaw shook his head. "It's not important. Forget I said anything."

"But if there's some cat you don't trust—"

Brambleclaw cut him off. "If you want to be remembered for your strengths, you must work on them. And if that means proving yourself to those who doubt you, then do it. You can't force Hollypaw to believe in you. You have to show her that you are worth believing in."

Lionpaw felt weariness weighting his paws. All he was doing was becoming a warrior the clan could be proud of, and making the most of his life. Hollypaw was just so focused on the warrior code that she couldn't see when it was wrong. Why should he have to prove himself to her? I haven't done anything wrong!

Chapter 21

Hollypaw picked one paw after another off the frozen ground, longing for the warm days she had experienced at the beginning of her apprenticeship. The few small patches of water near camp had entirely frozen over and the remaining dried grass was crisp with frost. The only water remaining was the cold droplets falling every few moments on her back, tail, or nose. A screech rang through the camp, and Hollypaw couldn't help but flinch at hearing the fluffy cream warrior who had always been so calm and kind so vulnerable and in pain. Was this what all she-cats had to go through when they had kits?

After what seemed like an eternity, her brother emerged from the nursery, sweeping his blank stare across the cats waiting outside. "It's done." He declared. "Daisy has had three healthy kits."

"Congratulations!" Brightheart called. Her cry was echoed in cheers erupting through the clearing.

"What do they look like?" Lionpaw wondered.

"Has she named them yet?" Cinderpaw asked as she walked up beside her. As Hollypaw watched, her friend didn't even seem to flinch as she stepped on her hurt leg. It seemed to be almost completely healed. But that's what we said last time too. The thought struck her, but she shook it off. Leafpool and Jaypaw wouldn't let her continue her duties until they were sure she wouldn't hurt herself again.

"I caught a fresh mouse this morning!" Mousewhisker interjected, pushing himself alongside the mouse to the front of the crowd. "Should I take it in for them?"

Jaypaw didn't seem taken aback by the crowd so much as annoyed by it, although maybe it was just the last comment. "I don't know what they look like, Daisy has named them Toadkit, Buzzardkit, and Rosekit, and they are less than a day old. They should not be

eating vole."

"Well, I can bring it for Daisy, then." Mousewhisker still sounded excited. "She'll need to eat well now that she's feeding kits."

"I know," Jaypaw mewed shortly. "Better than you, I should think."

"I can't wait until they're old enough to come out of the nursery and play," Mousewhisker went on. "Do you think Firestar might let me mentor one of them?"

"They're your half brother and sister," Jaypaw meowed discouragingly. "Firestar probably won't—" He shook his head. "It's irrelevant anyway. No one but Leafpool and I, Ferncloud, and the kits are allowed in there right now. Daisy needs to rest."

"Okay. You know best Jaypaw!" The tom didn't seem put off by Jaypaw's attitude. "I never would have thought of helping Cinderpaw by teaching her to swim! Could you teach me too?"

"Why would you want to swim?" Hollypaw asked. Cinderpaw had to do it to heal her leg but for a cat to willingly go into the water, with no land to grab onto...she shivered at the thought.

"Oh well I-"

"Mousewhisker!" A sharp voice interrupted and Hollypaw saw the lean black form of Spiderleg pushing his way to to the front. "You're supposed to be on my patrol right now. Honestly, are you still an apprentice?" Mousewhisker was meant to go out on a sunhigh patrol? Then how had he caught a mouse already? He must have been out on his own, Hollypaw concluded .

The sun was indeed just past it's highest point in the sky. Thornclaw seemed to have already left with his patrol. He had promised her they would do training during the later part of the day but he didn't want an apprentice on the Windclan border with him, even if they were capable. I know you're strong, he had said, but we need to show Windclan that we aren't taking their crimes lightly, and an all warrior patrol is the way to do that. But it did occur to her, why was Spiderleg leading a patrol? He was the father of the new kits,

wasn't he?. It wasn't like Brackenfur to send him away just as they were born. But Spiderleg didn't seem to be commenting on it. Maybe it was some other tom

"Sorry Spiderleg. I'm coming!" Mousewhisker dropped the mouse at Cinderpaw's feet. "Would you get this to Daisy?" he whispered. "Jaypaw might listen to you."

"I listen to you too." Jaypaw's ears twitched. "I just don't follow you."

Mousewhisker stuttered for a moment, but decided against replying. Instead he turned to follow his former mentor, along with Ashfur and Sorreltail, out of the camp.

"He was so excited about the kits." Cinderpaw mused.

Jaypaw snorted, shifting his head in the direction of the entrance. "He is a perfect example of why we don't allow every warrior to see the new kits. They get so excited they become reckless."

Cinderpaw moved beside Jaypaw so her fur brushed his. "Come on, you can't blame him." She mewed softly. After placing her tail lightly on Jaypaw's back, she turned back to Hollypaw and Lionpaw. "When I have kits, I'd want the father to be excited like that."

"You want kits?" Hollypaw's shocked exclaim came out before she even realized she would say it. It just seemed so strange to think about.

"Why not?" Lionpaw cut in. "I'd like to have kits too, one day." Yes, but you want them with a Windclan cat. But she didn't speak the thought aloud. She had promised to keep it a secret for now. It was wrong, but she had to trust her brother would come around eventually.

Cinderpaw's eyes were teasing as she looked back at him. "You can't have the kits mouse-brain!"

"I know!" Lionpaw sniffed, flushing with embarrassment. "But I'd still take care of them."

"What about you Hollypaw?" Cinderpaw turned her gaze to the black she-cat.

"I-I don't know." Hollypaw choked out. It was pretty clear Honeyfern and Berrynose would have kits eventually, but she never imagined herself reaching that point, and honestly hadn't put much thought into Cinderpaw or Lionpaw having kits either.

"I'm sure you'll make a great mother," Cinderpaw responded brightly. Before Hollypaw could respond again, Cinderpaw turned to Jaypaw. "Do you ever think about how you'll never be able to have kits as a medicine cat? It must be hard."

"Jaypaw wouldn't have found a mate even if he was a warrior." Lionpaw replied for him. "Neither of them would be able to stand each other."

"You don't know that. Jaypaw can actually be really nice sometimes."

"Sure, but even when he is he sounds like a pain in the tail."

"He played moss ball with me to keep up with my training and brings me down to the lake every day so I can build up my strength."

"But has he ever said something nice to you?"

"He doesn't have to! His mate would see how great he is inside."

Hollypaw sighed. They were only apprentices; surely it was too early to think about taking a mate anyway? She wanted to prove herself as a warrior, to show courage in defending her Clan, skill in hunting to feed her Clanmates, and the moral fortitude to keep her Clan the greatest in the forest. She wanted to take responsibility for how her Clan was run, to make ThunderClan great for season after season. . . .

Hollypaw stood rigid, paws frozen to the ground. Yes! She thought. I'd much rather be Clan leader than a nursing queen.

For a heartbeat the strength of her ambition frightened her. Then

she calmed down. There was nothing wrong with wanting to be Clan leader, if it meant she would serve her Clan with every muscle in her body and every hair on her pelt. Turning away from her siblings and friend, she saw her mother, Squirrelflight, emerging from the warriors' den.

Hollypaw bounded over to her. "Squirrelflight, can I ask you something?"

Her mother's ears twitched. "Sure."

"You had kits," Hollypaw meowed, "but you manage to be a warrior as well. How do you do it?"

Squirrelflight narrowed her eyes, and for a moment Hollypaw thought she saw something flash in their green depths, some emotion she couldn't understand. But her mother's voice was even as she asked, "Why do you want to know that?"

"I was just wondering. . . ." Hollypaw felt awkward. "I just feel like every cat expects she-cats to have kits, and I'm not sure I want that. I want to be a warrior."

To her annoyance, Squirrelflight's tail curled up in amusement. "Don't try to plan so far ahead!" her mother meowed. "StarClan already has your path marked out, and there'll be twists and turns in it that you can't possibly expect."

"But—"

"Look around you," Squirrelflight went on. "Plenty of she-cats have kits and then return to the warriors' den."

But do they become Clan leader?

"Don't worry about it," Squirrelflight finished, resting her tail-tip on her daughter's shoulder. "Just concentrate on your training."

That doesn't help, Hollypaw thought frustratedly. That doesn't help me at all. Squirrelflight didn't spend much time in the nursery during their later moons, but even if she left as soon as possible Hollypaw would need to be in the nursery for three moons, cooped

up and stifled like she was in the medicine cat den. And look at the pain that Daisy had to go through! Hollypaw shook her head as her mother padded away. What could possibly be so great about having kits that made it worth all the trouble?

Hollypaw looked over to her brothers, who were still bantering with Cinderpaw, probably over kits. Maybe it was the responsibility that made kits appealing. Maybe being able to bring new life into the world and being partially responsible for their successes was what drove cats to want kits. But then, why not become a mentor? You would have more influence on a cat's career if you trained them. Kits don't even remember their first few moons once they're warriors!

Besides, to be a good leader, you need to be a mentor to the whole clan. That would have much more impact than a nursing queen. It was why mentoring an apprentice was a requirement to becoming deputy in the warrior code. Hollypaw knew what she wanted to do. Once she became a warrior, she would be a mentor!

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey gather beneath the highrock for a clan meeting!" Firestar's voice rang from the top of the highledge, his flame-colored pelt blazing despite the dark clouded sky behind him.

Hollypaw hurried to the front of the crowd. "What's going on?" she asked Cloudtail, who was chattering happily with his mate, Brightheart. She didn't know there would be a meeting today.

"Icekit and Foxkit are going to be apprenticed," Brightheart replied.

"And about time, too," Cloudtail muttered. "They frightened my fur off the other day, yowling that Windclan was attacking us."

His mate gave him a gentle prod with one forepaw. "Kits are kits, Cloudtail. You know they'll be good warriors one day."

His only reply was a snort. Hollypaw looked around for her friends, and spotting Lionpaw and Cinderpaw sitting together, she bounded over to join them. Ferncloud emerged from the nursery with Foxkit and Icekit. Dustpelt followed; the brown tabby warrior looked ready

to burst with pride. Hollypaw caught his eye and smiled, dipping her head to show she shared his pride. Icekit and Foxkit were still very young when she and her siblings became apprentices, but it was great to see them start training too.

The kits' eyes were bright with excitement, and their glossy pelts shone in the sunlight. Both of them were trying hard to be dignified, but halfway across the clearing Foxkit gave a little bounce; his mother caught up to him and flicked him over the ear with his tail. After that he managed to walk calmly until she and her sister reached the front. Icekit briefly pressed against him, her tail tip twitching in her own excitement.

Firestar surveyed the clearing for a moment. The murmuring quieted as his gaze fell on each cat, and then the bright orange tom began. "First, I would like to congratulate Daisy and Spiderleg on their new litter of kits."

Cheers burst through the clearing, calling the names of both parents and all three of the kits. But Spiderleg was definitely the father then. Hollypaw looked once more around the clearing, but didn't see the lean black tom anywhere. Why wasn't he here with his kits?

"And now, it is a privilege for me to show these kits what awaits them when they are old enough." Firestar bounded down the tumbled rocks from the Highledge and called both kits to stand in front of him.

"Brightheart," he began, "your time for an apprentice is long overdue. I know when Jaypaw became a medicine cat you were worried, but you have no need. You will be mentor to Icepaw."

Brightheart stepped out of the crowd, her head and tail held high despite the expression of mixed relief and elation that showed through in her eyes. As she padded toward Firestar, Icekit padded up to meet her.

"The whole clan is aware of the courage and compassion you give your clanmates," Firestar continued. "Do your best to pass these qualities on to Icepaw."

Icepaw reached up to touch noses with her new mentor, and after murmuring something that made Brightheart smile, the two cats withdrew to the side of the hollow.

Brightheart's a mentor now , Hollypaw told herself. And she had kits. It was possible to do both. So why do I still not want to?

Firestar's gaze rested on a young white she-cat. "Whitewing, you too are ready for your first apprentice. In the last few moons you've proved yourself a strong and strategic warrior. You will be mentor to Foxpaw."

Eyes glowing with happiness, Whitewing padded over to her apprentice. They touched noses and followed the other new apprentice and her mentor to the side of the clearing.

"Icepaw! Foxpaw! Icepaw! Foxpaw!"

The rest of the Clan began to crowd around, congratulating them and calling the apprentices by their new names.

Hollypaw noticed that Berrynose and Birchfall stayed where they were. "Huh!" Berrynose exclaimed, loud enough for the cats around him to hear. "I don't know why Firestar picked Whitewing. I'd be just as good as her at mentoring."

"Firestar picks the best cat for the job," Sandstorm told him as she walked past. "Whitewing is much older than you, and frankly has done much more for the clan so far. And Whitewing could have become a warrior much sooner if she hadn't been waiting for you, Birchfall."

Berrynose muttered something Hollypaw didn't catch. Birchfall shrugged, but he had his gaze locked on Whitewing with a mix of emotions on his face.

"You'll have an apprentice soon," Sandstorm assured him. "For once the Clan has plenty of kits."

Berrynose didn't dare complain any more, but he still looked discontented. And Birchfall seemed to be forcing a smile on his face. Berrynose whispered something in his ear, and the two toms moved

away with their heads close together. Hollypaw sighed, deciding not to bother with them for now.

Suddenly Thornclaw burst through the entrance. His wild expression whipped around the clearing to scan it as quickly as possible. He must be upset he missed the ceremony. His sister had finally become a mentor, after all. Still, it wasn't so bad. She could explain it to him while they were training.

Standing up, she took a few paces towards her mentor before he races away, but not towards her. Instead, he went straight up below the highrock where Firestar and Brackenfur were speaking. "Windclan was at the border!"

Immediately both the leader and deputy stiffened, standing into a ready position. "Have they crossed onto our side?" Brackenfur asked.

Thornclaw nodded. "Yes, although they didn't know we were there at the time. They looked desperate!"

Firestar narrowed his eyes, half in anger and half in worry. "Desperate about what?" Did he really still care for the Windclan leader after all he had done?

"We're not sure. The rest of the patrol is on its way back now but I wanted to alert you about this as soon as possible."

The Thunderclan leader nodded his head, scanning the clearing before his eyes fell on her. "Hollypaw!" He shifted his head momentarily back to Thornclaw. "Would you take your apprentice with you and Brackenfur to Windclan's camp?"

Thornclaw dipped his head, stiffening his expression back into one of stern duty. Hollypaw scampered up to his side, trying to keep her tail from twitching. She was being sent on a mission by the clan leader! With the clan deputy!

Firestar looked beyond the warriors in front of him, his gaze flitting over each cat in the clearing as if he was looking for something specific. "I'd like to send Leafpool along with you as well, if

possible."

"You'll have to settle for me." Jaypaw's gruff meow came from just behind the Thunderclan leader, startling him into a small jump. "Leafpool is busy taking care of Daisy and the new kits."

The flame-colored tom didn't speak for a moment, but dipped his head in acceptance. "I just want to show that this patrol specifically is not a threat, so that they will allow you to go to Windclan's camp, and speak with Onestar."

Brackenfur nodded, looking focused. "What do you want us to say to him?"

"I need you to find out what's going on in WindClan." A spying mission! Hollypaw felt a surge of excitement. "Our relationship at the border has clearly escalated beyond warnings. I need you to find out if something has gone wrong with their territory."

Jaypaw blinked. "What difference does that make?"

"If there's going to be a battle with WindClan, I want it to be for a good reason," Firestar replied.

Thornclaw swished his tail over the ground. "But if they cross our border, isn't that reason enough? They've been pushing at it for moons!"

"Yes," growled Firestar, "but we might be able to stop them from crossing the border from now on."

"They've already done it once and gotten away with it," Jaypaw pointed out. Hollypaw shot him a glance and he seemed to register it despite not being able to see her. Apprentices aren't meant to speak to their Clan leaders like that, even if he was technically right.

"That could have just been a mistake." Firestar responded, not seeming all that upset by the comment. Maybe as a leader his reputation was strong enough for petty comments not to matter. Firestar went on. "Windclan has made clear they want their border to be strong, but they haven't crossed until recently. It would make

sense for WindClan to invade us if they are worried about their own territory. But what if Onestar leads an attack on us out of fear? Blood would be shed for no reason."

"I don't understand what you think we can do." Brackenfur plucked at the ground. "If we find out that nothing is wrong, do you want us to ask Onestar not to fight? Won't that make us look weak?"

Firestar stiffened. "You must make it clear that we are ready to fight if we have to," he meowed. "I'd just rather fight a battle driven by real need, not empty fears."

"But still, you want us to persuade Onestar not to attack us unless he has no other option?" Thornclaw pressed. "Won't we look like cowards?"

Anger flashed from Firestar's pelt. "We're not cowards," he snapped, "but why should we fight pointless battles to prove it?" His gaze passed over each cat on the patrol in turn, daring them to continue. "Go speak with Onestar. We will see what must be done."

Hollypaw sniffed the air. The cold air didn't carry scents well without the drizzle which was increasing in intensity. The scents of rabbit and the border itself were easy enough to make out but Hollypaw couldn't detect individual cats like she could when Thornclaw took her there on her first day as an apprentice. But her brother, stiffening, must have smelled smoothing else.

"WindClan cats are coming." Jaypaw meowed.

"Seems like Nightcloud." Thornclaw murmured. "Tornear, Harepaw, and Owlwhisker are with her," Thornclaw's pelt fluffed out defensively.

"Relax," Brackenfur ordered, though his tone made it sound more like a suggestion. "They mustn't think we're showing any sign of aggression."

"Because we're begging a favor," Thornclaw muttered under his breath.

"Save your opinions for camp," Brackenfur hissed quietly. Then he

raised his voice. "Tornear!"

"What do you want?" Tornear's mew was accusing. The patrol approached behind him, and Brackenfur raised his tail to keep Thornclaw back.

"Firestar has sent Jaypaw and I to speak with Onestar." Brackenfur's mew was calm, neither hostile nor yielding.

Surprise pulsed from Tornear's pelt. "What for?"

"We wish to speak with Onestar," Brackenfur repeated.

Tornear shared a glance with Nightcloud, who's fur had sharpened along her neck. She shook her head, and Tornear turned back to the group. "Just you four?"

Brackenfur dipped his head, indicating Jaypaw should step up next to him by placing his tail on the young medicine cat's back. "We only wish to talk."

Nightcloud's eyes were lit with fury but Tornear seemed ready to reluctantly acquiesce.

Carefully, beside her mentor, Hollypaw crossed the border. Brackenfur kept his tail on Jaypaw's flank, though for once it didn't seem he was trying to lead him so much as make a show of unified authority for the Windclan cats. An icy chill swept over her fur as the cloud-blocked sun and open fields removed any possibility for warmth.

Soon though they reached camp, with a sudden dip in the ground surrounded by brambles.

"Stay close," Tornear warned.

Hollypaw walked step-by-step with Thornclaw as the WindClan warrior led them into a swath of bramble, through a twisting, turning tunnel that led down into the hollow. The WindClan cats were emerging from their dens. Each face held varying levels of curiosity, hostility, and even fear.

Tornear was whispering to a young tom. Hollypaw strained to hear but before she could make out the words, the tom hared back out of the camp. The brambles rustled and a few moments later paws pounded into the clearing. Onestar.

"What's this about?" the WindClan leader demanded.

"Firestar sent us," Brackenfur meowed.

"Why?" Onestar paced warily around them. "Are you in trouble?"

"No."

"Then why come here?" Onestar halted so close to them that Hollypaw could smell the rabbit blood on his breath. "Does Firestar still think there's some kind of special relationship between our Clans? Because there isn't!"

Brackenfur kept his voice steady. "Firestar understands that." It was remarkable to see him like this. Dealing with his own clanmates, and Firestar especially, he had always come off to Hollypaw a little timid. Here though, he seemed as unyielding as an oak. "He doesn't want to shed blood over our shared border," he went on.

"Then why did you come?" Onestar growled.

"To talk."

Tornear tore at the ground. "Was Firestar too mouse-hearted to come himself?"

"Firestar didn't want to provoke you by sending a warrior patrol," Brackenfur explained. "He wants to soothe the situation, not inflame it."

Crowfeather was circling them. "Then he shouldn't have sent anyone!"

"Get out of the way!" Onestar hissed, nudging Crowfeather aside. "What do you want to talk about?"

"Firestar wants to know if something is wrong with your territory."

Brackenfur was growing impatient. "Is that why you've been hunting so close to our border? Are you being forced into ThunderClan territory or do you simply want to take our land because you are foolish enough to believe you can?"

Hollypaw was shocked by his fierceness. Onestar froze. Brackenfur had surprised the WindClan leader too. Angry whispers darted between the watching cats. Hollypaw tensed, waiting for Onestar's answer.

"The twolegs have been bringing their dogs out further, but no one has invaded our lands," Onestar began slowly. "But that doesn't mean they won't. Does Firestar expect us to wait until they do? Does he think we should sit around like fat voles waiting to be pounced on?"

"But you are not voles," Thornclaw snapped. "Why not defend your border instead of threatening ours?"

"We will defend what borders we have to," Onestar retorted. "And take what territory we need."

"You don't even know that the dogs will be an issue," Jaypaw pressed. "Why threaten us?"

"WindClan fights with claws not words," Tornear warned.

Hollypaw bristled. "It's like trying to show worms to moles!" he hissed. "They're too blind to see beyond their own noses."

"We're too blind?" Weaselfur mocked.

"Wait!" Onestar ordered. "Perhaps she's right. Perhaps we should give time for us to understand what's going on before we do anything."

"They crossed the border," Tornear reminded him.

"Only once."

Hollypaw could see the WindClan leader's face become contemplative. He was considering it. "We can't let them drive us

into unnecessary bloodshed," Onestar murmured.

Suddenly, a panicked yowl split the air beyond the camp wall. The dripping brambles shook and a WindClan queen skidded into the clearing. "My kits are gone!" she screeched.

"Sedgekit?"

"Thistlekit?"

Alarmed mews filled the camp.

"Sedgekit, Thistlekit, and Swallowkit!" panted the queen.

"All of them! Disappeared!"

"When did you last see them?" Onestar demanded.

The queen was fighting for breath. "I left them in the nursery and went to stretch my legs. They weren't there when I came back, so I went looking for them. They've wandered out before, but not far. But this time there's no sign of them. Their trail heads toward the Thunderclan border and then just disappears! I just know a dog has gotten to them!"

"Calm down, Gorsetail." Onestar was bristling but his mew was steady. "You can't be sure. But we must send out a search party." The Windclan leader's tabby head whipped over the Thunderclan patrol. "I would suggest you leave now." He growled.

Brackenfur narrowed his eyes. "But we-"

Suddenly, paws pounded through the entrance tunnel.

"Onestar!" Ashfoot pelted into the clearing. "Breezepaw and Heatherpaw are missing! They didn't come back after their hunting assignments!" They were gone? At the same time as the kits?

"You must leave." Onestar had turned back toward the Thunderclan patrol. "And if we find out this patrol was just a distraction so your clanmates could take our young cats, we will return your favor in kind."

"You're not going to attack, are you?" Hollypaw gasped.

"We'll do what we must to get our young cats back!" Onestar hissed. Windclan was going to start a war over nothing!

"But you don't know what happened to-," Jaypaw objected.

Onestar cut Jaypaw off with a snarl. "Go home!" Hollypaw flinched as the WindClan leader leaned in close. "You can tell Firestar that it's too late. You've messed with the wrong clan. We'll attack at once!"

As the Thunderclan patrol hared away back to their own territory, Hollypaw could only feel one thought cross her mind. Heatherpaw. She must have betrayed Lionpaw's trust, sneaking the kits away to provoke war with his clan. The time for silence was over.

Chapter 22

Lionpaw shivered. The rain had reached right to his skin. It was good that the rain seemed to be erasing the frost that had covered the ground for days, but in it's place was cold water that pierced and chilled him right to the bone as it sunk into his fur. He dropped his vole on the fresh-kill pile and shook the water from his pelt.

"That was good," Ashfur congratulated him stiffly. "You've improved a lot this past moon. I was worried your mind wouldn't get back on your training fast enough to be ready for your assessment."

"Does that mean it's going to be soon?"

Stormfur padded up next to them. "I wouldn't be surprised." He meowed. "You were great out there, Lionpaw."

Brook nodded. "I don't think I would have been able to get that squirrel. You did very well."

Ashfur snorted. "We'll see."

Lionpaw blinked at his mentor. It had been a good hunting patrol. He, Ashfur, Stormfur, and Brook had caught nearly enough to feed the whole Clan and it was great to feel energetic again, a little faster, a little sharper than his Clanmates, as though StarClan guided his paws. But he couldn't help but wish he had been chosen to go to Windclan like his siblings.

Stormfur tossed a wet blackbird onto the pile. "Something's wrong." The gray warrior glanced anxiously around the clearing. Beside him, Brook narrowed her eyes. Cinderpaw was tugging twigs toward the thorn barrier where Poppyfrost was stuffing them into gaps. Dustpelt and Brackenfur were hurriedly patching the nursery with fresh brambles. Their rain-soaked pelts were spiked, their tails bushed out. Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight were circling the edge of the camp, staring up through the rain at the walls.

Brambleclaw flicked his tail toward a rift in the cliff face where the rocks jutted out. "We should reinforce the top there. It's too easy for cats to climb down."

Squirrelflight seemed to disagree. "Do you really think that's a priority right now? The walls will be slick enough with the rain."

"Exactly why we need to make sure they don't have any other ways to get into camp."

Lionpaw's belly tightened. He scanned the clearing. Had his siblings already returned from their mission?

He felt relief wash his pelt as he saw Jaypaw emerge from the medicine den . Leafpool was calling to him from the medicine den entrance. "We'll need more cobwebs. It would be nice to get some comfrey root as well."

"I'll find some," Jaypaw answered at once.

"Not by yourself," Leafpool meowed.

Jaypaw nodded. "I'll take Hollypaw with me." Lionpaw's paws throbbed with unease. His brother normally bristled with rage at any suggestion that he couldn't manage by himself. Now he accepted it without a murmur. And why wasn't Leafpool helping Daisy? He thought that was the only reason she didn't go to Windclan in Jaypaw's place.

"Don't go far from camp," Leafpool warned.

"Lionpaw! Have you heard?" Honeyfern was charging toward him, her eyes stretched wide. "There's going to be a battle!"

Lionpaw hurried to meet her. "When?"

"WindClan is getting ready to attack us right now," Honeyfern panted.

Lionpaw flattened his ears, panic rising in him. "I thought Firestar sent the patrol to lessen the tension?"

Honeyfern shook her head. "He thinks we stole Windclan's kits," she mewed. "And some apprentices too. WindClan is going to try to get them back. We have to be ready to fight!"

"But it doesn't make sense." Lionpaw's mind was whirling.

"Who cares if it makes sense?" Honeyfern trotted around him. "Onestar is convinced it's the truth. There's going to be a huge battle anyway. Leafpool said so."

Sorreltail was heading toward them, eyes clouded with worry. "You're jumping ahead of yourself, Honeyfern," she meowed.

"We have to be ready," Honeyfern argued, her green eyes shining with resolve. "Who knows what WindClan will do next?"

Lionpaw felt a prick of discomfort as he noticed Berrynose's rhetoric coming from the golden she-cat. He backed away from the two cats, his heart pounding. Had anyone really stolen the kits? There was another way off the moor, one their Clanmates didn't know about. What if the kits had found the tunnels?

He jumped as a voice sounded behind him. "You should eat," Spiderleg was stretching, flexing his muscles. "You must be ready for battle at any moment. Thornclaw told Firestar that Windclan is desperate enough to do anything"

Lionpaw froze. I must find the kits! I must stop this! But what about his Clan? He ought to be thinking about defending them. He should be helping fortify the camp like Poppyfrost and Cinderpaw, or joining a patrol to check the border. He couldn't go off and search for kits. What if WindClan attacked while he was gone? Ashfur would kill him if a battle started and he wasn't there.

This battle could be a chance to prove yourself as a warrior. Tigerstar's voice murmured in his ear. He twisted his head around, looking for the broad shouldered tabby, but couldn't see anyone. Was Tigerstar really here, or had he imagined it?

He shook his head. It didn't matter. He needed to think of his clan. Cats would be injured. Some might die! He shuddered as he thought

of Heatherpaw caught in the midst of the fighting. If the kits were only lost in the tunnels, the battle would be over nothing.

"Lionpaw!" Brambleclaw was padding toward him. "Get something to eat and help with the preparations. Firestar's organizing extra patrols and the barrier needs to be strengthened."

Lionpaw blinked at his father. His belly was churning. "I'm not hungry."

Brambleclaw shifted his paws. "Are you scared?"

Lionpaw opened his mouth, searching for the words to explain.

"It's natural." Brambleclaw's mew softened. "I used to worry about seeing my Clanmates wounded. But defending the Clan is part of the warrior code; it's what we've all trained for. I know it's tough but we're doing the right thing in the eyes of StarClan." He ran his tail along Lionpaw's flank. "You have the makings of a great warrior, Lionpaw, and I'm proud of you. Just remember what you've been taught and stay sharp."

"Do we really need to fight?"

"If your leader tells you to, then yes," Brambleclaw murmured. "Firestar won't lead any cat into battle unless he believes it's the right thing to do."

But Firestar doesn't know everything. Lionpaw suddenly felt weary. If only he didn't know about the tunnels. Then he could just do as he was ordered without question. Miserably, he nodded at Brambleclaw. "Okay." He padded to the fresh-kill pile, sick at the sight of the prey piled there as though it were any ordinary day.

"Why can't we fight?" Foxpaw's voice wailed across the clearing.

"We're apprentices now," Icepaw added. "The clan needs us!"

"We need you alive." Brightheart responded sternly. "You may be apprentices but that doesn't mean you are suddenly ready for battle."

Whitewing nodded, turning to her own apprentice. "The best way you can help is to hide inside your den till the danger is passed. Your time for fighting will come, but not this moon." Lionpaw watched them usher the young apprentices into their apprentices back into the den.

It wasn't just Foxpaw and Icepaw who were in danger. He couldn't possibly put his Clanmates at risk, not when there was something he could do about it. Narrowing his eyes against the rain, he veered away from the fresh-kill pile and headed past the medicine den. Slipping in among the dripping brambles he pushed his way through to the camp wall. He reached up to the first ledge and scrambled onto it. Ledge by ledge, he clawed his way to the top of the hollow, panting with the effort as he hauled himself over the top.

Crouching in the rain-soaked grass, he caught his breath and peeped over at the busy camp below. No one was looking in his direction. His Clanmates were still busy pressing twigs into the thorn barrier, gathering in groups to plan patrols, their wet pelts bristling with excitement.

"And where are you off to?" Lionpaw felt his stomach twist in anguish at the voice of his sister. He carefully turned around, seeing the black she-cat standing next to their brother. "I've been looking for you since we arrived back, but Spiderleg said Ashfur had taken you out hunting. "

"He did." Lionpaw replied immediately. That part at least was easy to say.

"But now you're sneaking out of camp?"

Lionpaw's face flushed. He had hoped his sister didn't see enough to tell he sneaked out. "I guess..."

"And you didn't answer me." Hollypaw's eyes weren't moving from him. She stood tall, her eyes blazing with determination he couldn't hope to match. "Where do you think you are going?"

"I want to find the kits."

"Great." Jaypaw added. "That's where we're going too, you can come with us."

Hollypaw flashed him a glare and, realizing he couldn't tell, swiped her tail over his back. "You can't just leave it at that! His recklessness is causing a war!"

Lionpaw's eyes flew open wide. "Wait, how is it my fault?"

"Your Windclan she-cat has allied herself with Breezepaw to start a war between our clans!" She growled. "And since neither of our clans has seen them, I'll bet you she's hidden them in the tunnels. You know, the ones you kept from your clanmates?"

The golden tabby's gaze fell to the ground. Heatherpaw wouldn't do that, would she? It had to all be a mistake. But if the kits really were in there... "I'm sorry." He meowed.

"That's all you have to say?"

"That's all he can say." Jaypaw cut in. "You don't know that Heatherpaw is intentionally starting a war, and he doesn't know she isn't." His head swayed between each of his siblings. If Lionpaw didn't know better, it would seem like he was looking at them. "If you two want to bicker about his actions, do it later. Right now, we need to find the kits."

It seemed strange for Jaypaw to be the one to break up the fighting, but Lionpaw couldn't deny he was right.

"Fine." Hollypaw finally backed off, turning in the direction of the Windclan border. "I assume you know your way around the tunnels?"

"Yeah." Lionpaw's voice came out shaky. He didn't know what he would find in there, but he couldn't back off. He needed to help his clan.

"Good. Then you'll lead us."

Paw steps pounded on the forest floor nearby. Lionpaw ducked back into the ferns, crouching down among the stems. Hollypaw and

Jaypaw stared after him, then glanced at each other as Thornclaw and Spiderleg raced out of the trees.

"You two had better hurry," Thornclaw meowed.

Lionpaw ducked down farther as Hollypaw glanced at the ferns where he was hiding, her eyes glittering with anger. Would she give him away?

Spiderleg flicked his tail. "Is everything okay?"

"Yes." Jaypaw's answer was firm. "We've just got a few more leaves to pick and then we'll go back to camp."

"Good." Thornclaw nodded. "We're heading up to the ridge to see if there's any sign of WindClan. We may be able to see if they've begun their attack from up there."

Suddenly, Spiderleg sniffed the air. "It smells like Lionpaw's been here."

"Yes." Jaypaw plucked another dock leaf from the soggy plant in front of him. "He came to tell us to hurry up."

"Has he gone back to camp?" Thornclaw asked.

"I suppose so," Jaypaw replied.

"Don't be long." Spiderleg padded to the fern where Lionpaw was crouching. He held his breath, praying that his golden fur wouldn't show through the green leaves.

"Come on!" Thornclaw bounded up the slope toward the ridge. Spiderleg turned and pelted after him.

As soon as their pawstep sounds disappeared, Jaypaw padded to Lionpaw's side. "How do we get into the tunnels?"

"Follow me." Lionpaw headed into the trees. He broke into a run, checking over his shoulder that Hollypaw and Jaypaw were keeping up. They weaved after him, skidding to a halt on the slippery leaves beside him as he reached the bottom of the slope where the tunnel

opened into the forest.

"Where is it?" Hollypaw squinted over the swath of brambles.

Lionpaw flicked his tail toward the rabbit hole Heatherpaw had first disappeared into. "There."

"That?" Hollypaw mewed in surprise. "No wonder no one's ever noticed it before."

Jaypaw was sniffing the air as though searching for something. His tail was quivering.

Lionpaw frowned. "Have you been here before?"

"I don't think so." Jaypaw's ears twitched.

Why did he seem so afraid? There was no time to worry. Lionpaw squeezed under the brambles. "Follow me." He pushed his way through; it was easier now after all his visits, although one or two fresh branches had grown since he was last here, and he ducked as they snatched at his ears.

Jaypaw stayed close behind him, his nose brushing Lionpaw's tail.

"The entrance is here." Lionpaw scrambled out of the bushes and guided Jaypaw to the hole in the side of the hill. He stopped beside it and sniffed the familiar scent of musty air flowing from the tunnel.

Hollypaw scrabbled out of the brambles after them and stared doubtfully at the hole. Rain dripped from her fur and each ear was tipped with a quivering drop of water. "We go in here?"

Lionpaw nodded.

"What about the rain?" Jaypaw sounded wary.

"It won't be raining inside the tunnel." Lionpaw was puzzled; surely he'd be glad to get out of the downpour?

Jaypaw flattened his ears and sniffed at the entrance. "Have you

been here before in the rain?" he asked suspiciously.

"No." Lionpaw was getting impatient now. There wasn't time for this. "We must find the kits before the battle starts." He squeezed into the entrance and started to pad quickly along the familiar tunnel.

"It's a little scary in here." Hollypaw murmured. As Lionpaw looked back her black pelt seemed to fade right into the shadows. Her voice wasn't shaking but it didn't have the strength it did before they entered the tunnels.

"It'll be fine!" Lionpaw tried to reassure Hollypaw, but he had to keep going. If they didn't find the kits in time, there was no telling what would happen.

"Wait!" Hollypaw called from behind. "It's too dark to see where I'm going."

Lionpaw waited while Jaypaw and Hollypaw caught up with him. They were both moving cautiously, their paw steps pattering unevenly on the rocky floor. Surely Jaypaw should be able to travel through the tunnels more easily than the rest of them? He was used to darkness. "There's a cave ahead," Lionpaw reassured them. "There's a gap in the roof so it'll be lighter there."

He moved on, slower this time. He could hear Jaypaw sniffing the air, and Hollypaw's fur brushing the walls.

"Do these tunnels really lead all the way to WindClan territory?" Hollypaw's mew echoed eerily in the darkness. "Have you been that far?"

"No, only as far as the cave," Lionpaw answered. Then he froze. He could smell familiar scents up ahead. WindClan! Was Hollypaw right? There were more cats than just Heatherpaw. Did she bring in a whole patrol?

Jaypaw's breath stirred his ear fur. "You know there are WindClan cats ahead."

"Yes," Lionpaw sighed. "And it's not just Heatherpaw."

"Perhaps we should go back," Hollypaw whispered. "We don't want WindClan to realize we know about this place. It would ruin our advantage."

"They probably know already." Lionpaw's heart felt as heavy as stone. Heatherpaw had betrayed their secret—he wouldn't be surprised if she'd betrayed him as well. He thought they would have kits together one day. He never would have expected her to do something like this.

He padded toward the dim light and stepped into the cave. In the gloom, he could just make out Heatherpaw on the other side of the river.

Breezepaw was pacing the edge of the cave behind her, sniffing at each tunnel in turn. "I've lost their scent."

"Lionpaw!" Heatherpaw sounded surprised. Breezepaw spun, hissing, to face Lionpaw. Heatherpaw's gaze darted anxiously toward her Clanmate as she went on, "H-how did you know about this place?"

Lionpaw understood at once. She was pretending she had never met him here before, which meant she hadn't told her clanmates about their meetings. It was a sensible plan, but it felt wrong to act like strangers after they'd shared so much time here. "I found it a few days ago by accident," he lied.

Hollypaw and Jaypaw were creeping out of the tunnel behind him. "I was chasing a rabbit and it led me down a hole and I ended up here." He flashed a warning glance at Hollypaw.

Breezepaw's pelt bristled. "These tunnels lead into ThunderClan territory as well?"

"I didn't realize," Heatherpaw mewed, wide-eyed. "I've only been as far as this cave before." And she didn't even tell her clanmates about the advantage of the tunnels! Hollypaw was wrong. Lionpaw felt a surge of relief.

"What are you three doing here?" Breezepaw demanded.

Hollypaw padded in front of Lionpaw, lifting her chin. "When we heard that the kits were missing, Lionpaw guessed they might be here."

"How did you know there was another entrance in WindClan territory?" Breezepaw flexed his claws.

"It was just a guess." Lionpaw shrugged. "There are so many tunnels. They might lead to ShadowClan territory as far as I know."

Breezepaw stared at him. The damp, stuffy air was thick with mistrust. "Is there any scent of the kits in your tunnel?"

"No," Hollypaw replied, her voice taut.

"We followed their trail here, but it's disappeared," Heatherpaw explained.

Jaypaw had cautiously crept forward and was sniffing at the river. Its usually sleek surface was rippling as though blown by the wind, and dark water lapped over the edges, forming pools in the dimpled rock on either side. "Is the water always this high?" he asked.

"Only after it's been raining," Heatherpaw answered.

"Does it get higher?"

Heatherpaw tipped her head on one side, puzzled. "I don't think so."

Lionpaw felt hot with embarrassment. Why did Jaypaw keep fussing about the rain? He wanted to find the kits and get out of here.

Breezepaw paced around his Clanmate. "These intruders might as well go home," he mewed. "We're looking for the kits. There's no need for them to help." He glared at Lionpaw. "Why are you bothered about WindClan kits anyway?"

Hollypaw flicked her tail. "There's going to be a battle over them, or haven't you heard?" Her tone was accusatory. Did she really still believe this was intentional? Heatherpaw and Breezepaw didn't have the kits any more than Thunderclan did.

"Can we stop chatting and get on with the search?" Heatherpaw snapped.

Breezepaw shot her an angry look. "What about them?"

"We may as well let them come with us," Heatherpaw mewed. "How are we going to carry three kits by ourselves?" Before he could answer, she headed for the tunnel nearest her. "We have to find those kits before any of our Clanmates get hurt."

"I agree!" Hollypaw leaped the wide river and glanced back at Jaypaw. "The water is about two foxtails wide," she told him.

Jaypaw crouched, preparing to jump. Lionpaw could see his paws trembling. Let him make it! He tensed, ready to dive into the rushing river if he had to, but Jaypaw sprang high over the river, clearing it with a tail-length to spare.

As Lionpaw jumped after him, Heatherpaw ducked out of the tunnel she had been sniffing. "They haven't been this way."

Lionpaw crept into another dark opening, tasting the air. No scent.

"This way!" Jaypaw was crouching in front of a narrow entrance, his whiskers twitching.

Hollypaw pushed past him and peered at the ground. "He's right! There's a paw print."

Lionpaw squeezed past her to look. Sure enough, there on the silty ground was a tiny fresh print. "They went this way." He glanced up and met Heatherpaw's gaze. Fear glittered in her hazy lavender eyes. The kits had been following his and Heatherpaw's scent trails.

"Oh, Lionpaw," she whispered. "What have we done?"

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"I'll go first."

Jaypaw hardly realized he had said the words out loud until he heard Breezepaw snort scornfully.

"You're blind!"

"And you can see perfectly in the dark, I suppose!" Hollypaw snapped. Despite her outward anger, he could hear her panicked thoughts rising and falling over the sound of his own. She was terrified of getting lost in here.

Jaypaw sensed Breezepaw bristle, but the WindClan cat didn't argue. He was glad, because he was on the verge of turning tail and fleeing back along the tunnel to the forest, where rain pattered on leaves and earth and didn't collect in cold stone tunnels to sweep away everything inside them. . . . All he could think of ever since he set foot in the first tunnel the feeling of drowning in the lake. Images filled his mind: the roaring of the water, the loss of his sense of direction, the shock as the wave hit him and swept him up like a leaf caught in a storm, gasping for air and finding only water to breathe. Don't think about it! At least this time he had control of his paws for the time being; he could focus on his instincts.

Lionpaw stepped out of the way to let Jaypaw pass. As Jaypaw brushed past him, he felt relief flooding from his brother's pelt. He thinks I'll do better in the dark than he will. He realized. I hope he's right. Cold air blasted over him, making his whiskers tremble. But the breeze carried something else, whispers he felt rather than heard, flooding from deep inside the tunnel like the pulsing of blood in his veins. He padded into the tunnel, feeling the darkness swallow him up.

This wasn't darkness he was used to. Blind in the forest, he could feel the warmth of the sun on his pelt, smell the fresh tangs that flavored the air, hear the wind that rustled the leaves. This darkness

was suffocating, musty, and cold, pressing against his fur and filling his nose and mouth. Nothing but blackness, thick as fur, soft as water, drawing him in.

The rock beneath his paws was covered in fine silt, the walls so narrow they grazed his pelt as he crept slowly forward.

"Can't you go any faster?" Breezepaw's mew was as jagged as the walls.

"Shh!" He tried to block out the terror filled thoughts pulsing from the other cats, and padded on, feeling the path slope downward, the tunnel widen, cold air jab his pelt as they passed under a slit in the roof. Was this really the right way? The draft flowing through the tunnel like water carried no kit scent, only forest air seeping through fissures in the roof.

Suddenly, a pelt brushed his flank.

Jaypaw bristled. "I'm leading, Breezepaw!" He barged the cat away.

"What are you talking about? I'm back here!" Breezepaw snapped from behind.

Hollypaw's nose brushed his tail-tip. "There's no one near you, Jaypaw."

Surprised, Jaypaw tasted the air. A new scent bathed his tongue. Not a Clan scent, but still definitely a cat. He tasted the air again, his pelt pricking with unease as the other cat pressed against him, matching him step for step.

"Head right." the voice whispered in his ear. What was that?

"I will walk with you, my friend, as you once walked with me," How could this random cat in the tunnel call him a friend? Jaypaw was sure he had never

Jaypaw blinked, trying to see. "Am I dreaming?"

"No," The tom whispered. "I have come to help. I know where the kits are."

"Why have we stopped?" Breezepaw mewed crossly from behind. They can't hear him. Maybe it was a Starclan warrior then.

Hollypaw's nose flicked Jaypaw's tail. "Are you okay?"

"Fine," he told her, then he lowered his mew to less than a whisper, breathing the words so that only the strange tom could hear. "Have you seen them?"

"I know where they are." Fallen Leaves pressed his pelt to Jaypaw's, urging him forward. "But we must hurry."

Jaypaw resisted. "Why should I trust you? You aren't even telling me your name!"

He could feel thoughts of grief and sorrow beginning to rise in the tom at his words, but he seemed to push them down. "My name is Fallen Leaves, and I promise I would never do you wrong. I could not leave you here to walk alone, when you walked with me like a brother."

"I've never met you before!" Jaypaw hissed quietly, aware of the rising confusion in the cats behind him.

"We don't have time for me to explain." Jaypaw tried to peer into Fallen Leaves' mind, hoping to find some amount of reassurance, but the tom had fully guarded his mind, and the only thought he could pick out was determination to help. "Just know that I have walked these tunnels for a long time," Fallen Leaves murmured sadly, "and I know them better than the moors above us."

Jaypaw steadied his breath. "You've really seen the kits?"

"They are alive, but they are cold. We must hurry."

Instinct alone might not be enough down here. Touching his tail to Fallen Leaves's flank, Jaypaw let the tom guide him forward into a tunnel that branched to one side. The passage sloped steeply down; Jaypaw's pads slipped on the floor. The rock was slick with rain.

"Are you sure you know where you're going?" Breezepaw called.

"Can you still smell them?" Lionpaw asked anxiously.

"They went this way," Jaypaw replied.

Fallen Leaves swerved again, nudging him toward another tunnel. "Duck!" he warned. Jaypaw dipped his head just in time, squeezing through a shallow gap.

"Keep down!" he warned his Clanmates as he wriggled beneath the pressing rock. The gap grew lower and lower until he was scrabbling on his belly.

"This feels like a dead end!" Hollypaw panted as she squeezed after him.

"It opens up in a moment," Fallen Leaves promised in Jaypaw's ear.

Jaypaw smelled the sweet scent of heather and felt rain on his face. There must be an opening in the roof ahead. He slithered out of the gap, relieved to feelspace around him.

"Which way now?" Heatherpaw's fur brushed the rock as she squirmed out after him.

"There are three tunnels," Lionpaw told him.

Jaypaw tasted the air, but there was no scent of the kits.

"This way," Fallen Leaves whispered. Jaypaw felt his whiskers brush rock on either side as he let Fallen Leaves guide him into another tunnel.

"How do you know we're going the right way?" Breezepaw's mew was sharp, but Jaypaw could sense the rising panic throbbing just beyond his outward ferocity. It came from every cat, filling the darkness with a suffocating dread that Jaypaw tried to block from his mind enough to hear his own thoughts.

"I can smell them," he lied. He mustn't let their fear Overwhelm him. Listen to Fallen Leaves!

The tunnel twisted and veered upward, then widened. Air filtered

through a gap overhead. The patter of paw steps slowed behind him.

"I knew it was a dead end," Heatherpaw sighed, stopping.

Jaypaw halted. A boulder was blocking the tunnel ahead. He sensed its unyielding bulk.

"We'll never get past that," Breezepaw mewed.

Rain pounded overhead, dripping through a gap into the tunnel and echoing off the rocks as Jaypaw sniffed the wet stone. He ran his nose along the boulder, following its smooth contours until his whiskers touched the tunnel wall.

A tiny gap opened between boulder and wall, too small to squeeze through.

"Now what?" Breezepaw snapped. "Do you think you can lead us back?" He didn't sound convinced. "Or did you just bring us here to show us this boulder? Let me guess, it's a special StarClan rock and it's going to tell us where the kits are."

"Shut up!" Heatherpaw hissed at her Clanmate.

"Why?" Breezepaw snarled. "We're lost underground! Do you want me to thank him?"

"Shh!" Lionpaw mewed suddenly.

"I'll say what I like!" Breezepaw retorted. "Just because he's your brother—"

"I can hear something!" Lionpaw hissed.

"What is it?" Hollypaw's pelt was tingling with excitement. Jaypaw strained to hear.

A tiny squeaking sound, just louder than the rain, echoed ahead of him. The kits? "Anyone there?" he called.

The squeak turned into an excited mewling. They were behind the

boulder! Jaypaw felt Fallen Leaves breathe in his ear. "I told you I'd help you find them."

"I think I can climb over it!" Lionpaw mewed. Jaypaw heard claws scrabbling against stone as his brother clambered over the boulder. Shallow water splashed faintly when he jumped down the other side.

"They're here!" His joyful mew echoed around the tunnel. More claws scraped against rock as Hollypaw, Heatherpaw, and Breezepaw scrambled over to join him.

"Thank StarClan we found you!" Heatherpaw purred. Paws splashed and a frightened mew answered her.

"We couldn't climb back over!" A high pitched squeal rang through his ears

"We thought we were stuck forever!"

"We'll take you home," Breezepaw reassured them.

"Go on, Swallowkit," Heatherpaw urged.

Tiny claws scraped stone and a soggy bundle of fur slid clumsily down onto the ground beside Jaypaw. "Are you okay?" he asked.

The rain was pounding harder. They had to get out quick.

"I'm fine but—"

Breezepaw's mew interrupted her. "Your turn, Sedgekit."

Fur brushed rock and another kit thudded lightly on the floor. Jaypaw reached out his nose to the newest arrival.

"Are you hurt?"

"No." The second voice he had heard came again. Swallowkit and Sedgekit were safe. But the third...Thistlekit, if he remembered correctly, was still to come.

Jaypaw swept the two kits together with his tail, pressing against their sodden pelts to warm them.

Breezepaw landed beside him.

Jaypaw stiffened. He was holding the third kit in his jaws. She was barely breathing and when Breezepaw laid her on the ground, she didn't move.

"Thistlekit went to sleep and now she won't wake up!" Swallowkit wailed.

Jaypaw pushed the trembling kits against Breezepaw and crouched beside the limp, wet body at his feet. She was cold, shivering with small convulsions. Jaypaw began to massage her body with his paws, trying to rub some warmth into her pelt.

Heatherpaw slithered back over the boulder. "Is she okay?"

"Help Breezepaw warm the other two!" Jaypaw ordered.

"We're hungry!" Sedgekit's mew was muffled by Heatherpaw's fur.

"It serves you right for wandering off!" Heatherpaw scolded. She sounded cross but Jaypaw could feel her fearful gaze jabbing his pelt as he worked on Thistlekit.

Rain dripped down harder through the gap in the roof. The silt had turned to slimy mud around his paws. He rubbed Thistlekit more urgently. He had to get them out of here.

Lionpaw and Hollypaw leaped down from the boulder.

"Do you know the way out?" Swallowkit asked, trembling.

"Of course we do," Breezepaw declared. "We found our way in, didn't we? Getting out will be even easier." He doesn't believe that.

"We'll get out," Jaypaw mewed softly. He waited for Fallen Leaves to whisper encouragement but he only felt the quiver of the young tom's tail against his flank. For the first time since arriving in his chamber he felt one thought pierce through Fallen Leaves' well

guarded mind. Not again!

Thistlekit began to cough and fidget beneath his paws. Warmth was seeping back into her body. She struggled to her paws. "You found us!" she gasped.

Hollypaw folded herself around the shivering kit. "Did you think we'd leave you in this horrible place?"

Surprise pulsed from the kit. "You're from ThunderClan."

"We've been helping your Clanmates to find you," Hollypaw explained.

"You've caused a lot of trouble," Breezepaw growled.

Lionpaw's tail swished over the floor. "We can worry about that once we're out."

A noise like rushing air suddenly filled the tunnels.

"The rain's getting harder," Heatherpaw mewed.

"That's not rain," Lionpaw murmured. "It's coming from inside the tunnels."

"Inside?" Sedgekit squeaked.

"What is it?" Breezepaw demanded.

Jaypaw felt sick. He knew what it meant. "The river is overflowing."

Lionpaw darted to Jaypaw's side, pelt bristling with alarm. "How do you know?"

Jaypaw closed his eyes. "I've heard something very similar before. The tunnels are going to flood."

Energy exploded from Lionpaw. "We've got to get out of here!" Swallowkit squealed as he snatched her up in his jaws. "Breezepaw, Heatherpaw, take the other two," he hissed out of the corner of his mouth.

"I'll lead," Jaypaw mewed. He had brought them here. He had to get them out. He pelted back along the tunnel. Fur brushed stone and claws skittered after him.

Fallen Leaves fell in beside him and matched the rhythm of his stride.

"You've got to get us back to the cave!" Jaypaw hissed.

"I will," Fallen Leaves promised. The young tom's paws made no sound on the tunnel floor as they raced onward, but his pelt was hot with fear and his mind flashed with a memory that slipped into Jaypaw's mind: paws churning through muddy water, struggling against currents too strong to fight, gasping for air and finding only water, disbelief as the world closed in and life ebbed from his body. He's remembering how he drowned! In these tunnels!

Jaypaw pushed on harder, ducking just in time to squirm under the low roof. He wriggled forward, the rock scraping his spine, his claws splintering against the stone. Struggling out the other side he paused, waiting until he heard the others emerge. The kits squealed with fear and pain as they were dragged over the rough stone.

"Nearly there!" Jaypaw encouraged. The tunnel was sloping upward now. Water washed his paws. One more twist, another turn. He could smell the scent of fresh air. He burst into the cave, hope springing in his belly.

We've made it! He could feel Fallen Leaves trembling with relief beside him. Ahead, the river was roaring.

Lionpaw shot out behind him. "Take Swallowkit!" He thrust the kit at Jaypaw.

Jaypaw snatched her in his teeth.

"What's he doing?" Hollypaw exploded from the tunnel with Heatherpaw and Breezepaw.

Jaypaw heard water splash as Lionpaw plunged into the river.

"Lionpaw!" he yowled, dropping Swallowkit. He strained to hear

over the roaring of the water. "Can you see him?" he begged Hollypaw.

"He's swimming!"

"He's crazy!" Breezepaw gasped.

"I'm okay!" Lionpaw coughed as he struggled, splashing, from the far side of the river.

"How are we going to get the kits across?" Heatherpaw called.

"There's no point!" Lionpaw yowled back. "The tunnel's blocked!" Panic edged his mew. "The rain has washed soil into the entrance. There's too much mud to dig through."

"What about our tunnel?" Heatherpaw called.

Breezepaw bounded away as Lionpaw splashed back across the river. "Blocked, too! Boulders have fallen from the roof!" Breezepaw called from the WindClan tunnel. "It's like a waterfall in here. We'd never get the kits up it!"

"We have to try!" Heatherpaw screeched.

"I don't think there's enough space at the top to get through," Breezepaw argued. Fear made him angry. "If a kit got swept down over the rocks, it might die!"

"We have to do something," Hollypaw yowled.

Jaypaw pressed against Fallen Leaves, trying to read his thoughts, but the young tom's flank seemed to be fading, and Jaypaw's shoulder passed with a shiver through the soft fur. "Fallen Leaves?" he hissed.

"I'm sorry!" Guilt and grief hung like mist in the air.

Jaypaw suddenly felt cold where the tom's warm body had been. Panic gripped him and time seemed to slow. For a heartbeat Jaypaw glimpsed a pair of green eyes. "Wait!" he called. "Come with us!"

Fallen Leaves blinked, his gaze filled with sorrow. "It's not my time to leave," he mewed faintly and then he was gone.

"Are we going to die?" Sedgekit's terrified mew rose above the torrent.

Jaypaw's mind whirled as he tried to work out some way to escape. Water sprayed his face as the river frothed and bubbled against the cave walls. Lionpaw pressed him back with the others until they were huddled on a narrow strip of earth, water snapping at their paws.

Help us!

Blood roared in Jaypaw's ears. Could StarClan hear him down here?

Suddenly a silvery light glowed at the edge of his vision, like moonlight creeping across a night-black forest. Jaypaw looked up and saw a smooth ledge near the top of the cave. Seated on it was a stick, the one Firestar had used to pull him from the lake. He was sure of it. But why would Starclan show him something so unimportant?

Jaypaw saw it. Across the stick were scratches, five long and three short. It's us! Droplets of water dripped down on the piece of wood, quickly turning into a cascade as the stick was drowned in water. We're going to die? Why would Starclan send him this? Just to let him know it was inevitable?

But then, the stick began to float.

With a rush of hope, Jaypaw understood. We're going to survive!

A paw clapped him sharply on the ear. "Stop staring at nothing and help us think!" Breezepaw snarled.

The vision disappeared and Jaypaw was in darkness once more. He turned to the others, his pelt bristling with excitement. "There's a way out of here!" he mewed. "I know it!"

"What is it, then?" Lionpaw demanded.

"I'm not sure," Jaypaw admitted. "Let me think for a moment."

"Thinking won't move boulders!" Heatherpaw screeched. "We're trapped!"

"We could wait till the cave floods and swim up to the hole in the roof," Hollypaw suggested.

"It's too small to escape through," Breezepaw growled.

"And the kits might drown!" Heatherpaw pointed out.

Jaypaw shook his head. There was something at the edge of his thoughts. An idea he could sense but not reach. The stick! It had been here in the cave. But he'd found it by the lake. How would it get here?

Water splashed at his paws. He recoiled, then froze. He pictured the river reaching up to the stick, lifting it, washing it away. Of course! The river must flow out into the lake. "We'll have to swim!" he cried.

"Swim where?" Lionpaw spluttered.

"The river runs into the lake. It'll carry us there!"

"But it disappears underground!" Breezepaw hissed.

"It comes out in the lake!" Jaypaw insisted.

"We're not RiverClan. We can't swim!" Heatherpaw wailed.

Lionpaw pressed against Jaypaw. "Will this really work?"

"There's no other way."

"If you say we must do it, then we have to trust you," Hollypaw mewed. Looking into her mind he saw only thoughts of genuine love and determination. The fear was still present but cast aside for something stronger.

"You might!" Breezepaw growled.

"If we don't do something, we're all going to drown!" Heatherpaw screeched.

Hollypaw kneaded the ground. "Let's try it!"

Swallowkit squealed in terror. "I'm not going in the water!"

"We'll hold you by your tails," Lionpaw promised. "We won't let go."

"By our tails?" shrieked Thistlekit.

"If we hold you by your scruffs, we'll swallow too much water," Lionpaw mewed. "You'll have to keep your head afloat by paddling with your forepaws like this." Water spattered from his paws as he churned the air, showing the kits how to paddle.

"I'm scared," Heatherpaw whispered.

"It's going to be okay." Lionpaw dropped onto four paws and pressed against the WindClan cat. Jaypaw was close enough to hear him whisper into her ear, "Our time together will be something I remember even when I'm with StarClan." A prick of resentment passed through Hollypaw's mind, but she pushed it aside so quickly Jaypaw thought he might have imagined it.

Heatherpaw trembled. "There will be no borders between us there."

Jaypaw blinked, startled by the emotion flooding between them. "We have to go!" he ordered.

"Line up at the edge of the river," Hollypaw instructed. "Lionpaw, you take Sedgekit, I'll take Thistlekit, Breezepaw can take Swallowkit."

"What can I do?" Heatherpaw asked.

"Hold on to my tail," Jaypaw mewed. "We'll help each other."

"Okay," Heatherpaw agreed. He felt her take the tip of his tail lightly in her teeth.

"I'm not going!" Swallowkit's paws splashed through the shallows as

she tried to make a run for it.

She shrieked as Breezepaw grabbed her and dragged her toward him through the water. "Don't worry, Swallowkit," he soothed. "I won't let go. There's no way I'm going to let you drown."

Swallowkit whimpered but didn't try to escape again.

"Come on," Lionpaw urged.

Jaypaw waded through the shallows. His paws throbbed with dread as he felt the tug of the river.

"Ready?" Lionpaw mewed.

"Yes!" Hollypaw answered.

Jaypaw tensed. "Jump!"

He hurled himself into the rushing torrent. Heatherpaw tugged on his tail as the water swirled her downstream. The current dragged him under and he was lost in his dream of drowning again, choked by the tumbling water with the bodies of cats all around him and his ears filled with roaring.

Oh Starclan, please let this work!

Chapter 24

Water roared in Lionpaw's ears as the pale light of the cave faded from sight. The river dragged him into the tunnel, the current pulling him under. His lungs screamed for air. He fought the urge to suck in water and kept his jaws firmly clamped around Sedgekit's tail.

Rock scraped past his ears and he felt air on his face as the river swirled him upward. He drew a quick breath before the river dragged him down once more.

A body brushed his and was swept away. Sedgekit struggled, raking her nose with thorn-sharp claws. He resisted the urge to fight, deciding to trust Jaypaw, letting the flood carry him, feeling stone graze his flanks as the water tossed him against the sides of the tunnel. The roaring grew louder till he thought his ears would burst.

Then peace.

The current let him go and the noise died away. He strained to see through the darkness. Was that light? Bright dots sparkled in the distance. Was StarClan waiting to welcome him? I will not die! All he could do was think it but he had so much left to do. He couldn't die now.

His head swam and blackness pressed in on the edges of his consciousness. He fought his way upward, frantically seeking the surface, praying that he wouldn't find rock above him. With a final desperate effort he pushed up and up until he thought the whole world must be water.

Suddenly, he burst through the surface of the lake, startled by the chill of the wind as it swept his face and filled his nose and ears. We made it! He gasped and spluttered, drawing in lungful after lungful of cold, wonderful air. Blinking water from his eyes, he saw that the dots were stars, glimmering through wind-torn clouds. The

rainstorm was moving away.

Sedgekit thrashed in the water beside him, fighting to keep her head above water. Lionpaw grasped the kit with his forepaws, let go of her tail and grabbed her scruff, paddling with his hind legs to keep both their heads out of the water. He forced himself to relax, letting the water support her and working his paws in a steady rhythm that held them afloat. Sedgekit coughed and wheezed, trembling against his chest.

Lionpaw scanned the dark surface of the lake for the others. Joy sparked in her belly when he saw Hollypaw's black head bobbing a few tail-lengths away. Thistlekit was clinging to her back, eyes shining in the moonlight. The rush of happiness almost surprised him. But regardless of any differences they had or fights they were in, she was his sister. He couldn't bear the thought of her being gone.

Bubbles exploded near him, and Breezepaw burst to the surface with Swallowkit. Jaypaw? Heatherpaw? Panic started to grip Lionpaw. Had they made it? He heard splashing behind him and he twisted around, dragging Sedgekit so fast she squealed with surprise.

Jaypaw and Heatherpaw were flailing beside each other, their paws spraying water as they fought to stay afloat.

"Jaypaw!" he called.

"We're okay!" Heatherpaw coughed.

Hollypaw swam toward them, kicking out with her hind legs. Lionpaw was surprised to see her swimming like a RiverClan cat.

"The shore's over there!" She could see it not far off and, reaching Jaypaw, she nudged him toward it.

Heatherpaw was splashing toward Lionpaw. He swam to Heatherpaw's side and grasped Sedgekit's scruff between his teeth, and together they headed for the shore.

Hollypaw swam beside Jaypaw, casting an eye back at Breezepaw.

For once there was no malice between them, and Lionpaw too looked over at Heatherpaw's clanmate to see him pounding through the water with Swallowkit's scruff in his jaws and his eyes fixed on the shore.

Lionpaw's lungs burned, but he didn't dare stop moving. With Sedgekit's fur blocking his mouth, every breath was a struggle, but he kept his gaze pinned on the shoreline and pushed on. At last, he felt pebbles graze his hind paws and, reaching down, touched the bottom with a forepaw. Thank you, StarClan!

Wading from the water, he dropped Sedgekit in the shallows and stood panting for a moment, struggling to get his breath back. Hollypaw and Jaypaw already lay farther up the shore, their flanks heaving while Thistlekit crouched beside them.

"How did you know it would carry us into the lake?" Hollypaw gasped, turning to her brother when she finally had a breath.

"It . . . it made sense," Jaypaw mewed between coughs.

Breezepaw was struggling out of the shallows a few foxtails along the shore. Swallowkit dangled from his jaws, her paws flailing as she fought to be put down.

"We're all safe!" Hollypaw breathed. She padded to Lionpaw and Heatherpaw, her trembling paws slipping on the wet pebbles. "Are you two okay?"

Lionpaw lifted his head. "Only half-drowned."

A purr burst from Heatherpaw. She flicked Lionpaw with her dripping tail and got to her paws. "We'd better get the kits back to camp."

"Let's take them to Leafpool," Hollypaw suggested. "It's nearer and we need to make sure they're okay." Thistlekit had collapsed, and though her eyes were open, her breathing was rapid.

"Hollypaw's right." Jaypaw joined them. "They need treatment for shock."

Swallowkit hurried toward them, Breezepaw at her side. "That was the horriblest thing I ever did!" She shook the water from her fur.

"You wait till you taste Leafpool's medicine," Jaypaw warned.

Breezepaw's eyes glittered with suspicion. "Leafpool?"

"The ThunderClan camp's closest," Heatherpaw told him. "We should get them treated."

Breezepaw stared at Swallowkit. There was blood on her fur where the rocks had scoured her pelt. "Okay," he agreed.

Jaypaw pricked his ears. "Listen."

Threatening yowls rang through the night air. Lionpaw stiffened as he recognized his father's voice, countered by the menacing growls of WindClan cats.

"It's coming from the forest border," Jaypaw mewed.

Are we too late?

"There's going to be a battle if we don't get back soon!" Hollypaw gasped.

Lionpaw leaped to his paws. "We can show them the kits. If they know they're safe, there doesn't need to be a fight."

"Are we going to the battle?" Swallowkit's eyes grew wide as an owl's.

"I can help fight!" Sedgekit mewed.

"There won't be a battle if we get there quickly," Hollypaw mewed.

Sedgekit must have had no idea that she'd helped cause this mess, or that she'd be fighting some of the cats who'd just saved her. "Do you think you can make it?" He asked her

"Of course we can!" Thistlekit flicked her tail.

Jaypaw sniffed each kit in turn. "They need herbs," he mewed

doubtfully. Then he lifted his chin. "But it can wait a while."

"Walking will warm them up," Heatherpaw pointed out.

Hollypaw led the way up the beach. Together they scrambled up the bank and pushed aside a swath of ferns, holding back the fronds to help the kits pass. Heatherpaw nudged Swallowkit up the slope while Breezepaw followed Thistlekit, pressing his muzzle against her flank to stop her stumbling. Lionpaw grabbed Sedgekit by the scruff and swung her up the steep bank, letting him drop beside Hollypaw.

"What's Jaypaw doing?" Hollypaw was staring at her brother on the shore.

Lionpaw narrowed his eyes. Jaypaw was crouched beside a stick. He was staring at it, eyes closed like he was asleep. He padded closer, feeling as if he were intruding.

"All safe, just as you promised," Jaypaw was murmuring, bowing his muzzle to the pale old wood. "Thank you."

"We have to go!" Lionpaw urged. Whatever was going on with his brother, they had a war to stop.

Jaypaw didn't stir. "Go carefully, Fallen Leaves," he whispered. "I hope you find your own way out one day."

"Come on, Jaypaw!" They must hurry. The yowls from the border were growing fiercer.

Jaypaw lifted his head. "I'm coming." He left the stick and padded to his side.

"What were you doing?"

"It's not important," Jaypaw replied, turning his sightless eyes on him. Lionpaw knew him well enough to guess that it was. Sometimes he wished he understood Jaypaw better. Hollypaw was easy. She was a pain in the tail a lot of the time, but there was no mystery to who she was or what she did. Jaypaw, on the other hand, seemed to be guided by invisible paws, as though he walked

in a secret world he could never be part of.

They caught up with the others. How soft the forest floor felt on his pads after so much rough stone. Breezepaw pushed the pace harder and the kits had to scurry to keep up. Thistlekit tripped over a root. Hollypaw instantly scooped her up and she didn't complain, hanging limp from his jaws, her eyes glazed with exhaustion. Sedgekit was panting hard.

"I can carry you again," Lionpaw offered. The kit shook her head, too breathless to speak.

Suddenly, Swallowkit squealed. A bramble had snagged her fur. Jaypaw plucked it free with his teeth. Lionpaw's chest tightened. It was cruel to make the kits travel so quickly through the forest. But they had to stop the battle.

"We're nearly there," he mewed.

The ground sloped down and Breezepaw broke into a run. Sedgekit and Swallowkit skittered after him.

An angry yowl echoed from the forest ahead. "I told you, we don't have your kits!" It was Firestar.

"Then where are they?" Onestar spat back. "RiverClan swears they don't have them either, and we've already checked the dogs. But they must be somewhere and we mean to find them."

"Put one paw across the border and we'll shred you!" Lionpaw could hear his mentors voice, and could just barely make out Brackenfur squaring up to Ashfoot on the Windclan side of the gully. Firestar stood shoulder to shoulder with his deputy. Thornclaw, Brambleclaw, Whitewing, Ashfur, Spiderleg, and Berrynose were bristling behind them as the WindClan cats faced them, fur on end, lips drawn back in threatening snarls. Crowfeather was tearing at the ground beside Onestar and Ashfoot, claws unsheathed, while Owlwhisker and Tornear paced up and down behind them.

Heart pounding, Lionpaw swerved past the kits and chased after Breezepaw. Brambles sprang back in his wake, flashing past his

muzzle. He burst from the undergrowth just in time to see Breezepaw leap across the gully.

"Stop! We found the kits," he yowled.

"There's no need to fight!" Lionpaw stared anxiously over his shoulder, willing the others to hurry.

"Where are they?" Onestar demanded.

"They're coming," Lionpaw promised.

The warriors stared in astonishment as the undergrowth shivered and Heatherpaw nosed Sedgekit and Swallowkit out into the open. The kits stumbled to a halt and stood blinking in the moonlight. Hollypaw padded out of the brambles, Jaypaw following, and placed Thistlekit gently beside them.

"Where in StarClan did you find them?" Onestar's eyes stretched wide.

Lionpaw's fur was prickling along his spine. He glanced at Heatherpaw and stepped forward. "They found their way into—"

Hollypaw cut him off. "They were down on the shore," she mewed. "They'd made themselves a camp to shelter from the rain."

Hollypaw was going to keep his secret? After all the problems she'd had with him, she was going to lie to keep him out of trouble? Lionpaw felt a swell of gratitude in his chest and Hollypaw looked between him and the others, seeming to dare them to speak otherwise.

Heatherpaw nodded. "They were just inside the ThunderClan border, right down on the beach." Her gaze fixed on Breezepaw. "Lionpaw, Hollypaw, and Jaypaw saw us looking for them and called us over when they picked up their scent."

"What scent?" Onestar meowed. "We didn't find one."

Breezepaw blinked. "The rain must have washed it away," he mewed.

Onestar beckoned the kits toward him with his tail. "Come here!"

Gingerly, Sedgekit, Thistlekit, and Swallowkit approached the border, ears flattened and tails down, and stopped at the edge of the gully.

"Why did you leave camp without permission?" Onestar growled across the gap.

Sedgekit lifted her chin. "We were exploring. A dog came by and we ran that way to avoid it."

"Exploring?" Onestar echoed. "We've almost fought started a war with ThunderClan looking for you."

Swallowkit hung her head. "We're sorry."

"We didn't think," Thistlekit added.

"It seemed like fun to build our own camp on the beach." Sedgekit's gaze darted toward Lionpaw with a mischievous twinkle in her eyes. She had no idea how important it was that the tunnels remain a secret.

Onestar gave an exasperated sigh. "Well I suppose we now owe you an apology for for the false accsation."

"Apologize?" Tornear lashed his tail. "We still don't know that they weren't lured onto Thunderclan territory by its warriors!"

"They were chased by a dog," Onestar reminded him.

"They're kits," Crowfeather growled. "They might not know."

"I smelled the dog scent myself," Onestar snapped. "We have to trust what our eyes and ears tell us."

Crowfeather bristled. "But Thunderclan still might invade."

Onestar narrowed his eyes. "Or they might keep the peace as they have promised. We'll find out in time. Until then we patrol our borders as usual. And if we see that dog, we'll teach it to stay on its

own land."

Lionpaw felt weak with relief. The threat of battle was over. The WindClan kits were safe.

Brambleclaw ran his tail along Lionpaw's flank. "You look exhausted. We should get you all home."

"Yes," Onestar agreed. He hopped across the border and lifted the kits, one by one, over the gully. "I'm sorry that our kits caused so much trouble."

"We have kits of our own," Firestar replied, a hint of warmth in his voice. "So we know what it's like."

Tornear snorted and grabbed Thistlekit by the scruff. He turned sharply and padded away through the trees. Owlwhisker picked up Swallowkit while Crowfeather lifted Sedgekit.

"Thanks for bringing us back!" Sedgekit squeaked as she was carried away.

Brambleclaw glanced at Jaypaw, who was hanging back beside the undergrowth. "Are you okay?"

"I'm fine," Jaypaw assured him. He began to wash his tail. Lionpaw blinked. Didn't he care they had stopped a battle? It was as though his quest had ended the moment they'd left the lake.

"I'd better go too." Breezepaw nodded curtly at Hollypaw and Lionpaw. "Are you coming?" He stared at Heatherpaw, who was lingering on the ThunderClan side of the border.

"In a moment."

Breezepaw snorted and hurried after his Clanmates.

Heatherpaw padded to Lionpaw and entwined her tail briefly with his. "Thanks for helping."

Lionpaw purred quietly, but feeling the narrowed eyes of Hollypaw and Firestar on his back, he couldn't help but realize what had

happened. One battle had been averted, but was another one still looming? Tensions between their clans would never go away completely. And he knew his visits to the tunnels with Heatherpaw were at least partially responsible for the kits wandering down there.

"We would have done the same for any cat," Lionpaw mewed flatly.

Pain and confusion flashed in Heatherpaw's eyes. "What is this about?" Her murmur grew quiet, and even as their other clanmates grew further away, Lionpaw couldn't help but lower his too, just to keep this secret.

"We can't visit each other anymore." He was surprised by how difficult the words were to get out, but he knew it was true.

"Why?" Heatherpaw's lavender gaze met his, looking deep into them for some answer to his change in attitude.

"We need to be loyal to our clans, and if we keep going like this, at some point we'll-I'll, have to choose between that, and you." Lionpaw dug his claws into the ground, longing for enough stability to say what he had to. "I can't fight for my clan if I'm worried about hurting you."

"I-I..." Heatherpaw's voice trailed off. Her eyes darted about as she tried to make sense of what he was saying. "I didn't realize you thought we were more than friends. I thought we were just meeting to have some fun, away from our clans."

Lionpaw felt a stab in his gut. Maybe he had been living a fantasy. Even if he had managed to keep seeing Heatherpaw, his dream of having kits with her was just a dream.

"I don't want to make this harder than I have to." She continued. "If you want to stop meeting, that's fine. I won't go to the tunnels anymore, and I'll keep them a secret."

Lionpaw felt a tug at his heart. He had been so sure of it a moment before, but hearing her reciprocate made him aware of just how permanent this separation would be. "We can still see each other at

gatherings?"

Heatherpaw smiled sadly, laying her tail tip on his shoulder briefly. "Maybe." She drew back, standing tall as she turned to follow her clanmates leaving the border. "You're going to be a great warrior, Lionpaw."

Lionpaw watched as she leaped the gully and disappeared into the shadows. Then he blinked at Firestar, his eyes expressionless. "Are we going home now?"

Firestar nodded and began to lead his Clanmates away. He felt a weight like a stone in his stomach. Nothing could be the same between them ever again.

Lionpaw headed for the tunnel entrance, weaving slowly through the trees. As he saw the brambles that guarded the tunnel entrance, the pang in his belly grew stronger. He wriggled beneath the prickly branches and climbed the slope, pausing in front of the small burrow where Heatherpaw had once called to him. He imagined her now, her purple eyes shining with excitement.

He would never see her again in that way. As a friend. As a fellow member of DarkClan with their own hidden territory. He couldn't have all that and still be a loyal ThunderClan warrior.

He closed his eyes, imagining he could still smell her scent drifting from the tunnel entrance. He knew that was impossible. A mudslide blocked the way now. It marked the end of the most precious friendship he'd ever known.

"Good-bye, Heatherpaw," he whispered into the tunnel, hoping the wind would carry his words through the darkness, picturing her waiting at the other end...

There will be no borders between us in StarClan.

He remembered the moment they'd shared in the tunnels when he'd thought they might die. The intensity of it still throbbed in his paws. How could he turn his back on their friendship?

I have to. So does she.

Lionpaw padded away through the shadowy forest. The wind brushed the treetops, and the ferns crackled as they slowly began to unfurl bright new leaves. As he watched, it began to warp around him. The trees grew thicker, blocking out the sun that was dipping below the horizon.

Fur brushed his flank.

Lionpaw jumped, tail bristling.

"We're proud of you." Tigerstar's mew drifted on the evening air. Lionpaw turned his head but as ever the ghostly warrior's presence was in his voice alone.

"You made the right decision." A second voice joined told him. Hawkfrost. He nudged Lionpaw with his shoulder, and Lionpaw shivered at his ghostly touch.

"I've lost my best friend," he murmured. "I never thought I would feel so empty."

"I am sorry." Hawkfrost murmured. "It will hurt for a while."

"But it will serve you well," Tigerstar declared. "You have seen what the warrior code does as it is now, tearing cats apart from the things they love, the things that keep them going. You have learned an important lesson, one that I could never have taught you with words alone. But I will teach you much more. There'll come a day when you'll be so powerful, you'll be able to tear down those barriers, and make sure no one loses their friends ever again. When that day comes, I promise you will never regret that you chose to be a warrior."

"I'd like you to keep most of the cats in camp today," Firestar was speaking with his deputy and a few warriors as he stepped outside. Cinderpaw was walking out after Birchfall, finally having her warrior assessment. Her leg had grown so strong through the practice, it might have been stronger than her other legs. He could only wish her luck. She deserved to have her name a long time ago. "But send a patrol to each border. We can't know what Windclan will do in the future, but whatever comes, we will listen to StarClan

and use the warrior code as our guide."

Hollypaw let out a slow breath beside him. "The warrior code," she murmured. "The warrior code." She repeated it as though it were the answer to everything.

Lionpaw envied his sister's faith. And her ignorance. She didn't realize how broken the system they lived under was, and how hard it was to still defend it when it hurt you.

"Thornclaw! Ashfur!" Their leaders words rang out across the clearing and The golden and gray warriors left a conversation with Spiderleg to go speak with him. They followed Firestar and Brackenfur into the leader's den at the top of the highrock. Lionpaw watched them walk in, rubbing his eyes.

They were probably going to speak about the near battle the previous day. "At least it means training today will start a little later." He groaned.

Hollypaw's eyes were bright with excitement as she looked at him. "You really don't know what that means?"

"...No?" What was his sister talking about.

"Thornclaw and Ashfur talking to Firestar, on the day of Cinderpaw's assessment?" The black she-cat was nearly hopping off her feet. "We might be made warriors!"

Chapter 25

"I passed!" Cinderpaw could be heard bursting through the camp entrance, her voice bright with elation. The sound of her pawsteps had the rhythm of any other cat, and if Jaypaw wasn't so familiar with her he wouldn't be able to tell she had ever been injured, let alone which leg it was.

Immediately pawsteps from all around the clearing thundered over to her. "Congratulations!" Poppyfrost purred.

"We'll be together at last!" Honeyfern added.

"I'm really happy for you, Cinderpaw." Lionpaw's murmur was genuine, but it lacked the energy of the others. His mind was on something else, a jumble of subjects drawing his attention away.

"Thank you everyone!" Cinderpaw mewed.

Thank Starclan. The thought came through so loudly, it drowned out all those around Cinderpaw. Jaypaw turned towards it, scenting Birchfall around the sound of his pawsteps climbing the highledge.

"And we'll be joining you soon!" Hollypaw added.

"Jaypaw!" Cinderpaw called, though he hadn't moved from his place in front of the medicine den. "Come join us!"

Jaypaw huffed but made his way over to the group. "Nice work." He congratulated. "You've earned this."

"I couldn't have come this far without you," she purred, pressing her head against his neck. "Thank you so, so much. You're going to be an amazing medicine cat."

It was true he had done well with Cinderpaw. Maybe Leafpool would let him get his name soon, along with his siblings. It would be nice to be seen as an equal, rather than everyone in camp bossing him around if his mentor wasn't right behind him.

"Let all cats old enough to catch their own prey join beneath the highledge for a clan meeting!" Jaypaw had been so lost in thought he didn't even notice the sound of Firestar approaching the front of the highledge, but now all the cats in camp were flooding to the front of the clearing, eagerly chatting amongst themselves.

Jaypaw padded up to the front between Lionpaw and Hollypaw and sat down. Come on! Hollypaw's thought rang out from his side. He could feel the she-cat's fur trembling with anticipation. What did she think was going to happen? Cinderpaw's warrior ceremony was exciting, sure, but did it warrant this?

He tried to probe further into her mind, but was cut off by Firestar beginning to speak. "Today, Cinderpaw passed her warrior assessment with flying colors!"

"Congratulations Cinderpaw!" Brightheart cheered.

"I knew you could do it!" Cloudtail's added.

"Well done Leafpool!" Sorreltail turned away from her daughter for a moment to look at the medicine cat. "You did such a great job with her, thank you so much."

"Don't mention it." Leafpool replied quickly. Her tone was stiff as it used to be, but this time it went away quickly as she thought of Cinderpelt's words. "I don't know how I would have taken it if you had lost your daughter..."

Sorreltail's mind focused on Leafpool, and he heard her take a couple steps towards the medicine cat. A rush of feelings hit her: confusion, joy, mostly relief. It was as if a clenched jaw had finally loosened in her mind. "Would you...want to share some prey with me tonight?" She asked hesitently.

"I'd like that." Leafpool responded after a moment.

Birchfall weaved around his apprentice. "I told you it wouldn't be long before you joined your denmates, Cinderpaw."

"But she will not be going to the warriors den alone." Firestar continued. Does he mean... "Two of our other apprentices managed

to find the missing Windclan kits and get them to safety with their own clanmates, preventing what would undoubtedly be a vast amount of unnecessary bloodshed." Two of the other apprentices? Did Jaypaw just not count because he was a medicine cat? He felt a pang of jealousy stab at him. Without him, Fallen Leaves wouldn't have been able to lead them to the kits, and Starclan couldn't have given them the way out! He knew Firestar didn't know about the exact details, but he wasn't even going to mention Jaypaw? "I have spoken with their mentors, and they have agreed. Hollypaw and Lionpaw will also become warriors today."

Jaypaw flinched as rapid thoughts of excitement blazed from Lionpaw and Hollypaw. It was like sitting between two suns. He could hear the names of his siblings in every head around camp. It was deafening. And not a single one of them was thinking of Jaypaw.

"Lionpaw, Hollypaw, and Cinderpaw."

Pebbles cracked as Firestar bounded down the rocks and into the clearing, where the Clan was already making space for the naming ceremony.

Thornclaw darted over to Hollypaw and smoothed her fur with his tail. "Well done," he meowed curtly, though the pride was evident through the stiff tone. "You've done your clan proud."

Ashfur weaved past Lionpaw. "You've done some good work."

"I'll do much more," Lionpaw promised.

Squirrelflight was shining with happiness. Leafpool sat beside her, a purr rumbling in her throat. She must be pleased for Cinderpaw , thought Jaypaw.

Jaypaw closed his eyes. It was a long time since he imagined he could be a warrior. But the dream had never left him. He let jealousy surge and ebb away. Then pride blossomed inside him. His littermates would be warriors!

"Congratulations," he purred.

Hollypaw rubbed her muzzle against his cheek. "Thank you."

Lionpaw flicked Jaypaw's ear with his tail. "I hope Icepaw keeps her promise to Mousefur, because I'm not cleaning out the elders' den anymore."

Ashfur's tail twitched. "If your Clanmates' bedding needs changing, then you'll change it."

Brambleclaw padded toward them. "Does Lionpaw think that Firestar's making him leader already?" he purred.

"I was just joking!" Lionpaw protested.

"Of course." Brambleclaw circled his kits and stopped beside Jaypaw. "I'm proud of you all."

Hazeltail and Berrynose made their way to the front.

"You'll make a fine warrior." Hazeltail mewed, turning her attention to Hollypaw and then Lionpaw. "I was, and am, very impressed by what you did."

"I suppose we can make room for you in the warriors' den," Berrynose teased. Now you can show me what's behind that bluster .

"I'm glad I'm not in there anymore," Mousefur called. "It'll be noisier than a nest full of starlings." The old warrior was sitting outside the nursery while Rosekit stumbled up to look at her. Warmth glowed from her pelt as Daisy squeezed out of her den behind her. Jaypaw smelled the fresh scent of a kit dangling from the queen's jaws.

She dropped Buzzardkit between Mousefur's paws. "Will you watch these ones while I fetch the other?" Daisy's mew was husky, as if her throat was sore. Jaypaw reminded himself to fetch the last of the honey for her after the ceremony. "I thought they might want to see their first naming ceremony," Daisy added.

"I'll make sure they're safe," Mousefur rasped.

They fell silent as Firestar addressed the Clan from the middle of

the clearing.

"I, Firestar, leader of ThunderClan, call upon my warrior ancestors to look down on these three apprentices."

Lionpaw clawed at the ground as Firestar went on. "They have trained hard to understand the ways of your noble code, and I commend them to you as warriors in their turn."

Hollypaw was already padding to stand in front of her lead, and Lionpaw hurried after her. Cinderpaw followed, her paw steps even and strong.

"Cinderpaw, Hollypaw, and Lionpaw, do you promise to uphold the warrior code and to protect and defend this Clan, even at the cost of your lives?"

"I do," Hollypaw breathed, quivering. Her mind had gone almost silent with nothing but pure single-minded duty.

Lionpaw stiffened with determination. "I do."

"I do." Cinderpaw sounded as relieved and excited as a cat that had just caught its first prey.

Jaypaw held his breath. For as much as he wished he could receive his name alongside them, this was the start of his siblings' independent lives in the clan. Who knows what they could do?

"Then by the power of StarClan I give you your warrior names." Firestar's fur brushed Hollypaw's. "Hollypaw, from this moment you shall be known as Hollyleaf." He stepped back. "StarClan honors your thoughtfulness and loyalty."

Lionpaw padded forward.

"Lionpaw, you shall be known as Lionblaze. StarClan honors your courage and skill in battle. And Cinderpaw."

Firestar paused as Cinderpaw approached him, trembling with excitement. "You shall be known as Cinderheart in honor of the everlasting fortitude that has brought you here." Jaypaw felt a swell

of pride. "StarClan honors your bravery and your determination. You are a warrior at last."

"Lionblaze! Hollyleaf! Cinderheart!" The Clan raised their voices defiantly as they welcomed the new warriors. Whatever happened with Windclan, or even Shadowclan in the future, ThunderClan would go on.

Jaypaw cheered with them, proud of his littermates and of Cinderheart, who had fought so hard to become a warrior.

"In the tradition of our ancestors, these three will guard the camp silently this night, until dawn." A memory flashed in the leader's mind, of his own vigil. He stood beside a young gray warrior, Graystripe maybe? As the light of dawn flowed in past the entrance at the old Thunderclan camp, Firestar shivered. And then it was green-leaf. How would Cinderheart, Lionblaze and Hollyleaf do now, at the beginning of leaf-bare?

"I'm sorry we couldn't get our names with you." Cinderheart's voice came before he realized she had walked over, with the other two new warriors by her side. "After helping me, you really deserved it.

"Yeah, and helping us!" Lionblaze added. "You know, finding the kits...by the lake."

You aren't fooling anyone, Jaypaw thought dryly. A moment of confusion passed over Cinderheart's mind but it left quickly.

"I don't know how you found them." Hollyleaf's voice was light, with a whispering tone absent from her normal speech. "Starclan must have shown you the way somehow."

Jaypaw dipped his head, though his eyes remained narrowed. "Something like that." There was no way he could explain Fallen Leaves or his help without divulging the tunnels they had decided to keep secret. "Congratulations to all of you." He wanted to get off the subject for now. Maybe one day he could tell his siblings what had happened in the tunnels, but it wouldn't be tonight.

"You'll get your name too, you know that right?" Cinderheart's mew

was soft and quiet, radiating a pity Jaypaw wished she didn't need. For someone who had never looked down on him for his injuries, hearing the same tone other cats used when they talked about it felt like ants crawling through his pelt.

"I know. Now go, you have a vigil to take."

"Are you sure?" Hollyleaf asked him. Her mind was trying to probe Jaypaw's. It felt like looking in a mirror. But Jaypaw wasn't going to let his jealousy ruin this night for them.

"I'm sure." He replied gruffly, flicking his tail towards the entrance.

"Alright. Sleep well Jaypaw!" Hearing his apprentice name coming through of Lionblaze's voice made the gap feel even larger. He began padding back to the medicine den, ready to sleep this off. He might be a good medicine cat, maybe even a great one, but he was never going to be as close to his siblings as they were when they were kits, or as close as they could still be to each other.

"Oh Jaypaw!" Millie stepped out of the medicine den, blocking the entrance from him. "Did you hear the news?"

She was visiting Leafpool, but she didn't seem to be sick, and they weren't especially close. She could be telling Leafpool about another cat who needed help, but her voice expressed far more excitement than worry. I can't wait to tell Graystripe! Even the surface level thought was enough to confirm his suspicion. "Kits?"

"I'm expecting kits!" Her reply seemed planned, as it didn't respond to or notice what he had said. "Wait, how did you know? I only just found out."

Jaypaw shrugged. "Lucky guess." It would be nice for Buzzardkit Rosekit and Toadkit to have some younger kits to play with. And unlike him and his siblings with Icepaw and Foxpaw, they might be in the nursery together long enough to become friends. "I'm happy for you." He told her, though he was aware his tone didn't give that impression.

"Thank you so much!" Millie didn't seem to mind. "I'm off to tell

Graystripe!"

The patter of the she-cat's paws across the clearing grew quieter as she ran towards the warriors den. Jaypaw turned back to the medicine den's bramble entrance, padding inside like he had meant to before.

"Ah, Jaypaw you're back." Leafpool's curt mew was accompanied by the sounds of shuffling leaves. She was sorting herbs. "We're going to need to hunt for some more borage. I wasn't prepared for two litters of kits this leaf-bare and with the frost, if we don't get it now it will be gone."

Jaypaw made his way over to the piles, feeling where he knew the borage cavity was. Leafpool was right. They would need to collect some more. But he couldn't just get back to business without acknowledging what had happened. "Leafpool?"

"Hm?"

"When will I get my name?"

The rustles stopped immediately, and a moment of confusion passed over Leafpool. I hadn't even thought... "When you're finished with your training, of course." She seemed to be forcing in a light tone to her voice.

"I invented a brand new technique to fully heal Cinderheart's leg!" He exclaimed. "I saved Breezepaw and Lionblaze's lives! I know every herb in this den and even you said I have a gift with Starclan. I can see your dreams at the Moonpool if I want to. I even stopped a war between Thunderclan and Windclan, a deed that Hollyleaf and Lionblaze were given their names for." He heaved, feeling just how much his breath had quicked from the rising anger. "So what will be enough for you? When will I have done enough to earn my clanmates respect? To earn your respect?"

Jaypaw... "I'm so sorry." She began. "Jaypaw, you already are a great medicine cat, and you do deserve credit for the work you've done..." She seemed sincere, but the But hung in her mind. "However, medicine cat training takes longer than warrior training.

You haven't yet gone through a leaf-bare as my apprentice. You helped Cinderheart but would you know how to treat an outbreak of greencough, or prevent sickness during starvation? And we've only just begun caring for Daisy and her kits"

"I'm sure there are plenty of things you learned after your apprenticeship!" He shot back. "You didn't know know how to help Cinderheart, for one!"

"There were other circumstances at play." She growled. Her mind flitted to Cinderpelt for a moment, but the thought flew away as soon as it appeared. "Every cat keeps learning through their life, regardless of their status in a clan."

"Then why-"

"Because you have to learn the fundamentals first! Being a full medicine cat means your clan could entrust you with its safety alone if it had to." Leafpool's mind clouded. A swath of images flashed in front of it. Badgers, Cinderpelt, lying in a clearing Jaypaw didn't recognize...and a black cat- She pushed it back before he could recognize them. "What if something happened to me? Could you really handle everything on your own?"

"So that's it?" Jaypaw's eyes narrowed. Whatever Leafpool was thinking of, it didn't change what she was saying. "I'm a great medicine cat and I've done just as much if not more for the clan than my siblings but I still have to wait until another season ends before you'll even consider giving me my name?"

His mentor hesitated. A flash of thoughts flew through her mind, too quickly to pinpoint any of them. Careful- The only word he could pick out faded. "This is the way it has to be." She meowed shakily.

Jaypaw let out a huff but didn't say another word as he stomped out of the den.

As he heard her sigh and her pawsteps retreating further into the cave, a strange sensation prickled through Jaypaw's pelt. There had been something wrong with the way Leafpool spoke to him just

then, and with the word that had pierced her mind. Be careful of what? It was as if she were wary of him. No. He must have imagined it.

He realized how hungry he was. Most of his clanmates had settled down for the night. He could hear Ferncloud ushering the new kits into the nursery. Mousefur was complaining about her bedding but Longtail seemed to be comforting her. Brambleclaw and Squirrelflight were speaking with Stormfur on the other side of camp, but it was too far for Jaypaw to make out their words. Jaypaw made his way over to the fresh-kill pile and selected a small mouse from the meager remaining supply.

"Yes, that's it for the night." Firestar called from the center of the clearing. "Thank you, Brackenfur."

"I'll see you in the morning Firestar!" Brackenfur responded before padding off to join his mate.

Jaypaw could hear the leader's pawsteps grow louder, and felt his scent grow stronger until he stood right over Jaypaw. Firestar was Squirrelflight's father. That made him Jaypaw's kin. But they had rarely ever spoken, aside from ceremonies and the day he saved him at the lake. It was strange for Firestar to want to speak to him.

"I'd like to apologize," he began, letting out a breath he had been holding for a while. "I know it must be hard to be separated from your siblings like this."

Jaypaw turned back to his mouse, taking another bite before he replied. He had just had this talk with Leafpool. He didn't need it again with the clan leader. "I'm a medicine cat," he meowed gruffly. "I was separated from them long before tonight."

"Are you enjoying that at least?" Jaypaw heard Firestar sit down in front of him. The sound of his voice came through slightly clearer at the end, without having to go down towards him. "I know Leafpool wanted you to be a medicine cat, and the work you've done since has been exemplary, but I don't want you forced into something you don't want to do."

The idea of there being a choice hadn't occurred to Jaypaw, let alone his leader offering him one. For the first time he was forced to think about it. He did have a talent for the job, and Starclan gave him a destiny and some sort of special connection with them that allowed him to see the other medicine cats' dreams. But would he be happier as a warrior? Would he be happier if he had stayed Brightheart's apprentice? Would he be happier standing vigil over at the entrance with his siblings, a proud new warrior of Thunderclan?

I couldn't have come this far without you. Cinderheart's voice coursed through his mind. Thank you so, so much. You're going to be an amazing medicine cat. She was so dejected when she was injured during her assessment. It was thanks to him that she regained her never-ending joy and optimism. It was thanks to him that she was able to stand there as a warrior too. Being a warrior, he might be able to patrol or hunt, or fight for the clan, but he wouldn't have been able to do that. He wanted his name, but not as a warrior anymore. "Yes, I do enjoy it," he finally replied. "For better or worse, I want to be a medicine cat."

"I'm glad." A wave of relieved thoughts flooded over Firestar's mind. "I'm sorry I couldn't reward you in some way tonight. Leafpool will decide when you are ready and I don't understand enough about the world you are both a part of to dictate that choice for her." A spark of worry pierced him. My daughter... but he shook his head and it was gone. "But I want you to know that after all you've done, you have my respect, and my gratitude. I think you will be very successful if you give it time, both you and your siblings."

Jaypaw blinked open his eyes. He had not intended to delve into Firestar's mind, but here he was, in an unfamiliar place. He stoof on a dry, sandy bank in a narrow, high-sided gully. Above him, the night sky stretched like a black river, speckled with stars and lit with a full moon's glow. There were no bushes to shelter him, no soft ferns thick with the smell of prey, just a few prickly shrubs and smooth boulders casting round shadows like puddles on the ground. A familiar scent pricked his nose. Firestar. His deep mew echoed from the far side of the gully. Pelt pricking with curiosity, Jaypaw padded toward the sound and saw, among the great black arching roots, the shadow of an opening. Firestar's moonlit form was

silhouetted against the dark entrance. Jaypaw ducked down behind a thick root.

"I don't know," Firestar spoke to the other cat with him, a ragged dark gray tom with blue eyes, barely visible in the shadow of the tree. "It hasn't been easy, but I've always tried to do what is right for my Clan."

"No cat would doubt your loyalty," Skywatcher agreed. "But how far would it go?"

Firestar stayed silent, his face lit with confusion. This wasn't Thunderclan, in either territory, but the cat he spoke to definitely seemed to know about them.

"There are difficult times ahead," the tom went on, "and your loyalty will be tested to the utmost. Sometimes the destiny of one cat is not the destiny of the whole Clan."

Firestar tipped his head to one side. This sounded like a warning, and Firestar wasn't keen to interrupt it. Was he speaking to a Starclan cat?

The gray tom rose to his paws; his eyes blazed with reflected moonlight. For a heartbeat Jaypaw was sure he could see the glitter of stars tangled in his fur, confirming his theory. The old cat's voice was soft, but charged with power, stronger than it had been before.

"Your Clan is safe for now. But there will be three, kin of your kin, who hold the power of the stars in their paws."

The two toms kept speaking a few moments more, but Jaypaw's ears were filling with the blood pounding through them and the ringing of his own thoughts.

There will be three, kin of your kin, who hold the power of the stars in their paws. An image scorched his mind: he saw himself beside Lionblaze and Hollyleaf, eyes gleaming and pelts rippling with strength. They were kin of Firestar's kin. With a dreadful, ominous certainty, he knew what the old cat was trying to tell Firestar.

He, Hollypaw, and Lionpaw were the three cats in the prophecy.

That is why this memory came to the leader when he looked at Jaypaw. That's why he was wary of him. Coldness reached through his pelt, setting his fur on end as it drove into his flesh. And at the same time, excitement surged through his paws. This was his destiny—and Firestar had known all along, but had chosen not to reveal it. Why? Because he was afraid of having three such powerful cats in his Clan?

Jaypaw stifled the purr that rose inside him, knowing he must not be seen by the other cats. Suddenly it didn't matter that he was blind, or that he didn't have his name or recognition yet. None of that mattered in the face of this prophecy, that promised a greater destiny for him and his littermates than anything a cat had dreamed of before. Leafpool was right to be wary of him. All his Clanmates should be. And not just of him, but of Lionblaze and Hollyleaf as well. He couldn't wait for the sun to rise. His siblings had something they needed to know. One day we will be so powerful that we shall command even StarClan!

Note from Sunnyfall:

I don't expect to make this perfect. I don't expect that I even could. I've never done long fiction writing before, but I hope to improve as I go on and I do have a solid idea of the story that I would personally have been happier with. As the story and characters are roughly the same as the original, my job so far has been approximately half author and half editor, in that some of the writing was copied from the original story and edited for a different order, perspective, wording, or to contain different details. However, the amount of original material will vastly increase as I get further into the series. The story for all books and chapters is already outlined.